

CONAN

AND THE SORCERER



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ANDREW J. OFFUTT



Conan faced three armed men, coming at him well separated. "Better come all at once," he said quietly. "First man dies."

Clamping his lips then he pounced, cutting at a watchman's eyes while holding the man's gaze with his own. The ruby-wearing young noblewoman stared . . . Her bosom heaved and the tip of her tongue came out to wet pink-tinted lips . . .

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Thrill to Robert E. Howard's gorgeous world of Heroic enchantment; within these very pages lies

CONAN AND THE SORCERER



CONAN AND THE SORCERER

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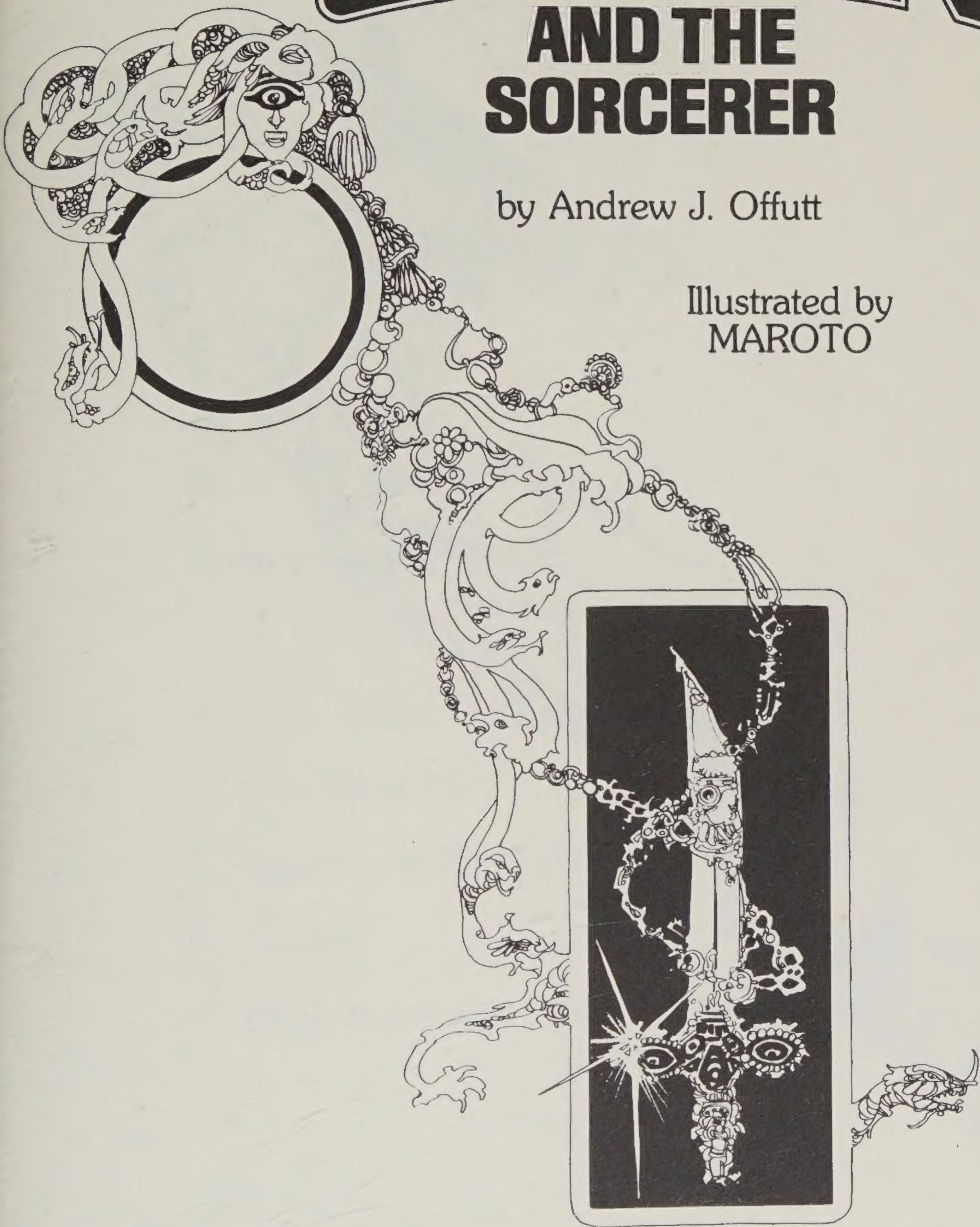
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CONAN

AND THE SORCERER

by Andrew J. Offutt

Illustrated by
MAROTO



SUNRIDGE PRESS



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1.

The Plotters

Torches flared murkily on the revels in the Maul, where the thieves of the East held carnival by night. Elsewhere in Arenjun of Zamora, flames flickered almost daintily above fine lamps filled with scented oil. In the Maul, noise ruled, nor was it all of pleasant conversation.

Elsewhere in the City of Thieves, folk were more quiet spoken, and alleys that were less muddy were a little safer. The dancing golden light of fine oil lamps struck fire from the gems winking on the fingers of cool-eyed nobles with tilted chins. It brought soft gleams from the pearls sewn on the tunic-bosoms of merchants aspiring to their ranks. Lamp-glims coaxed green flashes from the emeralds about the fat neck of a lord's useless wife and blood-hued glints from her sneering daughter's rubies and garnets and carnelians. The whisper of good silk accompanied the movements of well-fed bodies.

In the low, greasy-beamed dens of the thief-clotted Maul, rascals gathered.

Here were cutpurses with ferretish faces, kidnappers with hooded, appraising eyes, swift-fingered thieves, restless doers of death, ever alert. Swaggering bravoed strutted their harlots with strident voices and unsubtle bushes of hair. Blue lace agates or badly-cut bits of rose quartz were their best gems, along with flashing mica and bits of glass. One bosomy Nemedian in the company of a balding Kothian mercenary — between employers — wore a piece of refulgent aventurine that covered her finger from knuckle to mid-joint. Supposedly of old Atlantis these stones, where the hexagonal pillar-mounted

green crystals were said to have given the long-sunken land its power.

Not here; not in the Maul.

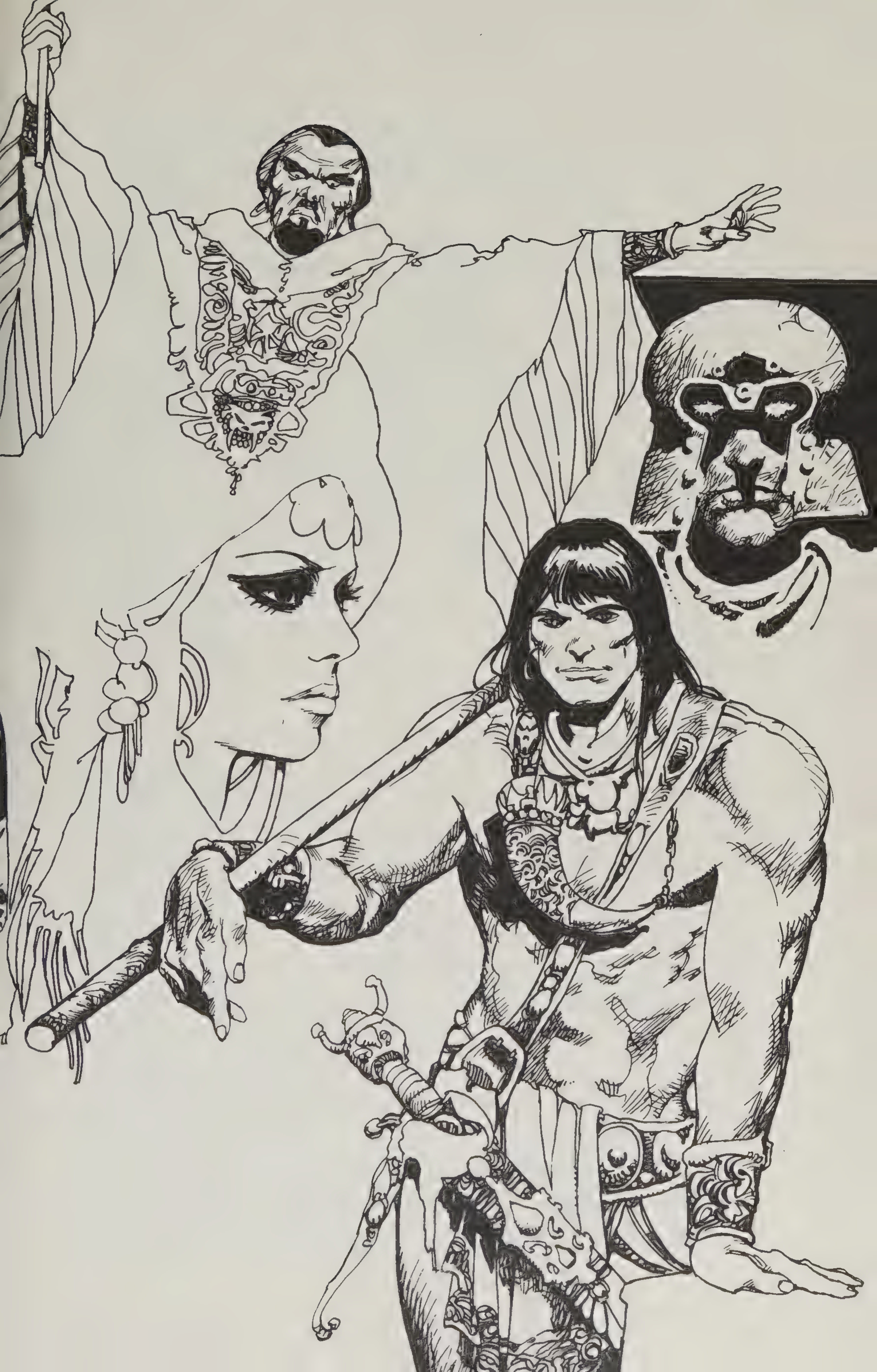
In the Maul of the Thieves' City of Arenjun of Zamora, power rested only in the sheaths and scabbards of the strong and swift.

Someone groaned from within the brooding dark maw of an alley. No one took note, or seemed to. Day's light would show whether the moan came from the dying or the bait of a trap.

One denizen of that dark clutch of muddy alleys and crumbling, pitted walls was missing this night, and was asked after in more than one rat-hole of a lowlife den. He was up-town this night, for his last three endeavors had brought him success.

The ruby-and-moonstone earrings plucked through an open window from a tabouret beside their sleeping owner's bed . . . these had bought him a good dagger a foot and a half in length, with its garnet-mounted sheath — and had paid his debts in two of the dives deep in the cess-pool called the Maul. While a councilman's spouse lay with her youthful lover in an alcove not ten paces away, her fine pearl-sewn collar, along with a goblet of solid gold (slightly mixed with tin, the fence had pointed out), had flitted out the window in a bronzed hand considerably larger than those of most burglars. These had brought the deft, cat-footed thief a good cloak worked with gold thread — sparsely worked, true — and a silken tunic whose blue caught the rather sullen glint of his eyes — as well as new credit in a third hole featuring thin ale and dreggy, watered wine.





Two narrow bands of cloth-of-gold writhed about its neck and sleeves, which were tight over his heavy upper arms.

Strangely, his third success was a commission, and accomplished a good deed. For purloining a pair of carelessly-bestowed emerald studs and an indiscreet letter and returning them to their giver, he received no less than three pieces of gold and seventeen of silver. An odd number, admittedly. Offered two plus ten, he had demanded five plus five-and-twenty, and had settled with his employer in the time-honored manner: in the middle. This last endeavor was enough to make a lad consider semi-honest employment. It was also enough to buy him a night out of the Maul, an occasion he hoped would lead to more and better things. Well cloaked and silk-tunicked, he strolled uptown.

Now the cloak was carefully folded and draped over the stool on which he sat before an intimately smallish trestle-board. A bit out of place, he nevertheless sat this night among the noble and the wealthy — for they were not always the same. He plied an attractive young woman with more earnestness than expertise. Young she was indeed, at nineteen — and yet older than he, despite his hugeness of frame. His continued wearing of a sword had been questioned: “Body-guard,” he had said. “My master will be along shortly. I’ll just keep it.” And none had said him nay, even here in the Shadiz Inn where gathered none but the well-born or well-moneyed.

The attractive young woman said, “They certainly grow men big, up in Symria.”

“Cimmeria,” he corrected.

He pressed forward toward her pretty face, leaning across the low round board in the up-town inn surrounded by unadmitted betters. When he nodded, his blue eyes flashed like sapphires.

“When I was a mere fifteen — oh, long ago,” he said, “I was six feet in height and weighed twenty pounds less than two hundred. I was part of the howling horde of blood-mad northmen that swept down on Aquilonia’s arrogant outpost of Venarium. We put those Aquilonians in their place — with sword and torch!”

Oh, ‘long ago,’ is it, she thought; and you not yet eighteen or I’m eighty!

For she knew men and gazed coolly on him from knowledge, this girl of nineteen who had been a woman at fourteen and was plucked from the streets at sixteen by a fat merchant of eight-and-forty. She and her brass-dyed hair and gilded brass breastplates had slipped a bit since then, economically. At least her current lover was younger, with prospects, and with his virility still on him. Too bad, really, that he’d be along directly. This giant hill-lad with the square-cut black mop over his broad forehead and smoldering eyes like the blue lace agates dangling from her ears . . . he was younger still, and he positively exuded virility.

Upper arms big as my thighs, only bulgy with muscle!

A boy though, and inexperienced, city-naïf, and surely a liar. And surely a thief, the street-wise woman thought. For how else in the City of



Thieves could a foreigner with such an accent come by the silver he'd shown their aproned host?

Well . . . until her Kagul came, this northish youth provided good wine and amusement and constant tingly thrills, for he *was* virile. Though such things were behind and beneath her, Kiliya could not help contemplate, too, the separation of this boy from his coin . . . Within her, a match of wrestling took place.

“Fifteen! Oh, Conan! I am never sure whether you’re serious or just trying to turn a poor girl’s head with your lurid tales!”

He blinked, and dungeon questioners of the drunkard king could have drowned in the blue innocence of his eyes. “I do not lie, Kiliya.”

They were youths together. “Oh?” She gave him a round-eyed stare from twinkling brown eyes set in the pale flesh of Hybori ancestry mixed with the peoples they’d conquered. “Never?”

“Hardly ever,” he said, and they laughed together. He moved his stool nearer hers. Under the board, his hand covered her thigh in every direction, and radiated heat.

She swallowed. “What do you do, Conan, you big hill-man? Oh — do you think we might have just a little more? Someone has sucked my cup all dry!” And she showed him her empty flagon.

Without taking his eyes off hers, he hoisted his arm straight up. He’d seen that wealthy importer signal thus, over there in the room’s center where he sat with a slimy-looking man and three women, one so hideous she must be the merchant’s wife.

“More wine here, and none of that cheap Ghazan grape-juice!” the Cimmerian said loudly, without looking from his companion. In a lower voice he said, “I’m . . . body guard, to a wealthy lord. He is grateful, as you can see.”

“Oh, yes. But . . . you mean you can really use that sword, with its positively ancient-looking handle?”

“Hilt.” He bent his left elbow in order to pat

the sword girded on that same hip, a yard-long blade in a sheath of worn, nubby leather. "Aye," he told her. "I can use it, Kiliya. I have. Its blade has been dyed nigh as red as those garnets there between your breasts."

"Rubies," she corrected.

He but smiled. It was a knowing grin, for they were garnets, and she knew he knew it. Body-guard indeed! The huge lad with his unlined face so tanned was a thief, sure. And her thigh sweated under his hand, and she didn't mind.

"Conan . . ."

"Yes."

She was still working at the making of a decision: "Every night some men of the City Watch come here. I think we shouldn't be here when they do — do you?"

His features arranged themselves into their version of an expression of sweet innocence, while he gestured with a huge bronzed hand. "Why not? Are we not solid citizens of solid, up-standing Arenjun?"

"One of us," Kiliya said, "is not."

He affected to look shocked, and bent forward. "Kiliya! What is your evil secret? Surely you're not the one responsible for the fall of that big old Tower of the Elephant I've heard about?"

"I think my secret is that I am sipping wine and having my thigh fondled by a blue-eyed, huge-shouldered, sword-wearing, Symrian . . . thief."

"Cimmerian," he said equably. Then, "I? A thief? Here? Hoho my dear girl . . . thieves hide in the Maul, and there skulk like jackals."

"I think," she began, "that some —"

“Kiliya! Whatever is my girl doing sitting with that boy? Ho sirrah — where is your other hand?”

Without removing the hand in question, from under the low board, Conan stiffened and turned to look over his shoulder. He gazed amid silence. Even in this section of Arenjun, an inn fell quiet when five men of the City Watch entered and their leader called out so — and particularly to a young sword-wearer who looked big enough to take on Hyperborean bears.

The Cimmerian remained silent, too. He but stared at the corseleted, helmeted man with the fancy dragon-headed hilt rising above his sword sheath and the swaggerish black moustachioes beneath his long nose. Conan was aware of his surroundings. He was not in the Maul, he was in the Shadiz Inn, uptown. He was surely in the presence of a sophisticated lady only pretending to be a bit less. Conan would not shout. He sat still, waiting, staring at the man who moved across the room toward him. All conversations had ceased; all gazes followed the progress among stools and boards of the Zamorian watch-sergeant, or were fixed on the big youth he approached.

Kiliya moved her leg; Conan’s hand unerringly followed. Crom was his god; any who knew so many as one Cimmerian knew that Crom was surely another name for stubbornness.

Tall, lean, lithe, not ugly though blade-marked on one cheek, the watchman stood over the seated man in the gold-purpled blue tunic.

“I would not shout across the room to you,

soldier," Conan said quietly. "It is my upbringing . . . I am no boy, and all three of us know where my hand is. I'd ask you to join us for a flagon, but we were just discussing leaving."

"You will leave alone, you with your barbar accent, and that swiftly! If you would depart with both hands, put them in sight."

No product of dissembling civilization, the Cimmerian didn't bother affecting to look shocked. His eyes suddenly bore no resemblance to sapphires or pretty blue agates. They smoldered, like an impossible combination of ice and volcanic heat.

"I break no law, watchman. You are not hired to bully honest citizens."

"I'm no watchman now, fellow. I went off duty a short candle ago. Just now I am an angry man standing over a boy whose paw is on the leg of my woman."

The Shadiz had gone silent, and remained so. The wealthy and the noble sat very still, and stared. Such an encounter had no place in this inn, in their civilized lives. A Corinthian mercer in a floriated robe glanced over as if to measure his distance from the doorway. Four watchmen clogged it, watching their sergeant.

"Conan . . ."

At Kiliya's voice Conan turned back to face her. He said, "Do tell this troublesome mouth that —"

He broke off at feel of the man's hand on his shoulder. With an instinctive instant marking of the location of the thumb, Conan knew it was the left hand. Too, he knew what the right was doing.

He heard the slither of metal against leather. The troublesome mouth was easing out his sword!

Conan released Kiliya's leg while he pivoted on his stool. His folded cloak sliding easily under him, he swung on his hams while his legs swung up and out. At right angles to his torso they slammed into the watchman's left leg just above the greave-strap. There was more force than the Zamorian could have believed possible in that short swing — and more force than he could bear. With an inhaled "Ah!" he went sidewise and down.

Stools scraped and a woman squeaked. A board slid and rattled on its trestle as a fat thigh moved swiftly. Someone muttered the name of holy Mitra. Conan meanwhile continued to pivot on his buttocks. His sandal-shod foot descended to slam onto the fallen guardsman's hip. The man groaned aloud.

"Kagul!" Kiliya cried out, pouncing up. "You stupid barbarian *boy*! You've hurt Kagul!"

She hurried to kneel beside the fallen watch-sergeant. He had not completed his draw, having fallen on his sword-arm. Instead, he rubbed his thigh. Conan blinked and half-turned to stare at the young woman he had been plying with wine and strong looks and brags. But he'd thought . . .

His face went ugly. Then the gaze of the kneeling girl leapt up and past him, and he lunged sidewise. That way the sword in the fist of one of Kagul's men chopped into the tabletop, instead of the Cimmerian's shoulder. Wine flag-ons and sweetmeats danced. Voices rose all about and stools scraped; a blow had been struck





in the Shadiz Inn! Too, but for the hardly believable pantherine swiftness with which the hillman moved his bulk, the sword would have removed most of his shoulder.

The surprised watchman took hold of his hilt with both hands to free his blade of the oaken board. He had every reason to believe that his intended victim was more surprised than he. He was wrong.

A bronzed fist came down like a sledge-hammer. The blow broke the Zamorian's forearm amid such pain that he swallowed his scream along with his tongue and had fainted before he hit the floor.

"Take him!" another of Kagul's men called.

More stools and trestle-legs scraped as other guests began making serious and assiduous efforts to be elsewhere. A *khilated* easterner stared. The Corinthian merchant departed the inn with such swiftness that his punk had to run to catch up.

"Damned barbarian," a retired general grunted. "Take him!"

"Take him!" Kagul snarled, rising with Kiliya's aid.

Kiliya, however, screeched: "KILL him!"

That last did it. Rude watchmen and treacherous city-girls who turned out to be more bloodthirsty than the women of the Vanir were more than enough. The hill-lad's illusions ended. His brief flirtation with the well-born and the moneyed of Arenjun ended both in his mind and in physical fact. Better he'd courted that ruby-bedizened lord's daughter over there — who

now forgot to wear her perpetual sneer while she stared, bright-eyed.

Conan lunged rightward, away from the two watchmen he'd downed, and he turned as he lunged. When he spun back, his long sheath of shagreen leather hung empty. His fist was full of hilt, and three feet of shining blade extended out and up before him.

A third watchman stepped forward and launched a stab with his sword. So the boy was big; who knew as much about sword-play as the trained policemen of a city half whose population was thief? True, one had only to train, and cultivate a swagger; sneak-thieves and cutpurses were wont to run, not stand and fight with uniformed men wearing good iron.

Conan did not seem to stand and fight either. He ducked with the same pantherish litheness and speed he had exhibited before. And, still crouching, he took a step toward his attacker. Bending forward over that extended left leg, he brought his own sword arcing over his head.

Such a high-elbowed, overhead stroke obviously meant a vicious downward slash, and the watchman protected his legs. He'd strike the chopping slash away with his own blade and chop open the barbarian's thick thigh on the backswing.

Conan's arm and blade did not, however, descend. His fist brushed the top of his black-maned head and his blade swept out horizontally from his brow. The long sword slammed into the Zamorian's mouth.

Blood splashed and the cry of horror and

agony was only a burble. The man showed his inexperience by dropping his own glaive and turning his back to the Cimmerian. He lurched away with both hands to his ruined face. Conan spurned the fellow's back; his considerable experience in combat had taught him not to waste energy on a man already out of the fight. This arrogant watchman was out of it: for the first time he had found someone who fought back — and for the last time.

Conan was astonished to hear a cheering cry amid the screams and shouts of horror and outrage that filled the Shadiz Inn. Someone here had learned not to love the keepers of the law — was it that dark big-nosed man in the *khilat*? The retired general, one hand on his paunch, bellowed his desire for a sword, secure in the knowledge that he'd not be given one. A younger man, a soldier though here without uniform or arms, stared with narrowed eyes. He backed; the big hillman's cleverness and considerable experience had just been made manifest.

Kagul was up now, and looking mean, with a handful of hilt. Indeed, both hands; he also drew his dagger.

Conan faced three armed men, coming at him well separated.

He was quite cool now that he was at bay. "Get back," he said, and napes prickled at the animal-like snarl. "If you value the lives of these curs, Kagul, call them off. Your experience is got from threatening shopkeepers and bullying little thieves and torturing harlots to make them talk. I have spent months in chains, back when I was

but sixteen. I have blooded this sword in combat — do you understand? Combat. I'll not suffer these dogs to lay hands on me."

The three blinked. Kagul's "curs" looked nervously to their leader. He firmed his lip and showed Conan his right side, long dagger poised in his left hand, sword advanced in the right.

"Take him," he said again, in a flat, inexorable tone. "It is not necessary that he be alive."

Conan crouched. "Better come all at once," he said quietly. "First man dies." Then he lifted his voice: "Up Bel!" the Cimmerian bawled, remembering the voice that had cheered his carving of a watchman. "Up Bel! Name of Bel!"

Clamping his lips then he pounced, cutting at a watchman's eyes while holding the man's gaze with his own. The Zamorian fell back and stumbled against a table formed of boards on trestle. A woman shrieked and the ruby-wearing young noblewoman stared with eyes gone bird-bright. Her bosom heaved and the tip of her tongue came out to wet pink-tinted lips.

To the dodging man's left Kagul came in, stabbing low. On the backswing, Conan's blade met his with a loud clanging ring. Kagul was only just able to parry the Cimmerian's swift chop — a stroke that came far too swiftly. The hillman handled his blade as if it were of paper rather than of heavy old iron. And at once he was backing a pace, flicking his eyes leftward, ready to meet the third watchman. It was then that a new voice rose, surely elicited by Conan's loud invocation of Bel, patron deity of thieves.

"Best seek the window, hillman! I hear the

tramp of more watchmen without.”

The rightward member of Arenjun’s police whirled to confront the owner of the voice sympathetic to the outlaw. There was only time for his eyes to register sight of an Iranistani in striped shirt and leathern vest; then the blue-bearded man from the distant east drove a three-foot Il-barsi knife into the Zamorian’s belly.

That was all the aid he gave Conan, and surely enough. The stranger had after all removed an enemy and warned the Cimmerian of enemy reinforcements. He was over a stool and past a nervous, backing Zamorian noble and out the inn’s open doorway in seconds.

Conan was alone, facing two antagonists, with more coming.

He did not wait for their attack.

The Cimmerian’s alert eyes had already marked the location of a window opening onto an alley. He drove forward in a running stroke that Kagul elected to dodge rather than meet with his blade. The barbarian plunged on past, racing to the far wall — and without pausing, he hurled his sword out the window. He followed, in a headfirst dive.

Outside, the blade clanged off a wall less than six feet away; it skittered on the ground while Conan, doubling in midflight, struck the alley’s hard-packed earth and rolled. He fetched up against that same wall, and came unwound without a groan.

To the Cimmerian, his movements were studied, methodical. To an observer had there been one, he’d have been a blurred series of

movements. His tunic's hem tore. As he rose, he plucked up his sword in his left hand. Still rising, he transferred the long blade to his right. It slid into its sheath before he was fully vertical. He was not looking; his head was up and his gaze was challenging the darkness, scanning the inn's construction; the eaves, the shelf formed by a continuation of the ledges of upper windows. In the few seconds that had passed, Kagul and his remaining watchman had not yet reached the window. The five men of a reinforcing squad had not quite reached the inn's main door. Conan kept moving.

Inside: Hurling aside a watchman by means of momentum and well-fed bulk, the retired general reached the window. He caught just a glimpse of the flapping of a torn tunic-hem as the fugitive rounded the inn's rear corner.

"Outside and around! He's run into the back alley, heading west!"

"I'd have been out the window and on him, my lord General Stahir," Kagul said, "but you are blocking the window."

The older man in the belly-strained tunic turned on the watch sergeant. Eyes stared, suddenly gone to ice in a slabby, purple-veined face.

"Enjoy the sound of your mouth, little man," Stahir said. "It is the second time tonight you have dog-yapped at a better. Once I report what your hot-headedness brought on this night, you'll be fortunate not to be talking to the torturer, much less retain a Watch command." And Stahir swung away. More watchmen were boiling into the inn; it was not from a sergeant they'd receive



their orders, but from a retired general.

When those watchmen raced around both sides of the Shadiz Inn to converge behind, they found nothing.

The moment he had rounded the inn's corner, on the run, the Cimmerian used his momentum and his legs' powerful muscles. He leaped; he caught a cornice; his biceps and the muscles of shoulders and back bunched as he pulled himself

up. Like a great cat, he was acrouch on the window ledge. He moved along a pace, turned. He squinted into the dark, considering. All in seconds.

While Kagul was receiving unpleasant news concerning his future, Conan was leaping onto the roof of the one-story building behind the Shadiz. By the time five watchmen reached the alley behind the inn, Conan was four buildings away, moving as only a Cimmerian could. He heard the seven watchmen calling to one another, spreading out, hurrying down dark alleyways. None thought to look upward; they sought a man, not a bear or mountain-cat.

Conan tore his tunic again, and only just forebore cursing. His fine new cloak lay on the stool of the Shadiz Inn, and not likely he'd be retrieving it! And now his fine new silken tunic was ruined. Could nothing good come of this night? Squatting, he moved along a roof's sloping lip to edge around an outthrusting, second-story alcove. It housed a tiny window that, intelligently, would admit air but no thief or assassin.

Conan froze at the sound of voices. They emanated from that tiny window, which was of another inn. The Cimmerian frowned, paused, staring at the window as if to hear better.

"Why it is valuable to this Hisarr Zul I know not," an accented male voice said. "Certainly it is valuable to our lord!"

"And so we become thieves," another voice said, also accented, and female.

Foreigners, Conan thought, and two of their words registered: *valuable . . . thieves*. Things

were hard enough for thieves in Arenjun, he thought with misplaced chauvinism, without foreigners joining in! And they were discussing their plans, were they?

With a wolfish grin, Conan crouched close to the cornice, like a jungle beast in the dark. Most attentively he listened to the conversation inside the inn's second floor room.

"For our lord, by Erlik!" the man had said.

"Aye," the woman sighed. "And by Erlik indeed . . . something called the 'Eye of Erlik,' and in the hands of one who fled Zamboula ten years ago. He is called a mage, this Hisarr Zul — do you know why, Karamek, such would want an amulet of our lord?"

"Our pay is good, and we've a third of it jingling in our purses. Cease questioning our good fortune, Isparana. We can live a year on what we'll receive for the return of the amulet to Zamboula — and live well! Enough that the Eye of Erlik belongs to our khan, and was stolen by an old enemy, and must be returned. You saw how nervous the khan was!"

"Karamek! Don't you even *know*?" the woman Isparana demanded, with incredulity ripe in her voice. "Did you ask no questions at all?"

"Our job," Karamek said with exaggerated patience, "is to steal it back. We need know nothing more."

"Well, listen then, my foolishly impulsive Karamek! The khan's Eye of Erlik is blessed for him, and peculiar to him through means sorcerous: by means of it he may be controlled or slain."



“Erlik’s beard! No wonder he wants it back!”

No wonder, mused the eavesdropper. And wouldn’t the Khan of Zamboula pay a pretty sum to see it safe in his own grasping hand again! Zamboula . . . methinks I have made Arenjun a bit warm for me, this night . . . One could do worse than to be favored of Zamboula’s ruler!

“And think further, Karamek,” Isparana was saying, still with an exaggerated tone; the clever explaining to the impetuous boy. “Were the khan controlled or slain, another would gain Zamboula’s throne rather than his son, Jungir. That would be Balad! And —”

“Balad! By Yog Lord of the Empty Abodes! — that would be disaster!”

The only disaster, the Cimmerian mused, trying to settle comfortably, would be if a pair of Zamboulans were to aid Zamboula’s ruler so — rather than a fine big expert thief from Cimmeria! And he listened closely whilst they laid out a plan. They spoke nervously of Hisarr Zul’s awful guards, single-minded zombies who had no thought but to protect their master’s domain and slay all interlopers. Karamek and Isparana presumed *other* defenses too, shuddersome ones; it was for dark sorcery that the man Zul was driven from Zamboula these ten years past.

“Two nights hence, then, by Erlik’s beard,” Isparana said, “when the moon is gone and the sky dark as Hisarr Zul’s heart!”

Conan, grinning wolfishly, already plotting, half-rose and crept off across the roof. He pounced to another and thence to the ground, so that by means of dark alleys he would soon van-

ish into the Maul.

Two nights hence, eh, he mused. But on morrow's night there will be hardly any moon . . . and that's when I will steal this valuable amulet! Zamboula's nervous king should pay and pay well for his Eye of Erlik, to ensure his dear brat's ascension!

As he crept away into the night, smiling, planning, he missed the rest of the Zamboulans' conversation.

"Two nights hence, eh?" Karamek said. "Nay, nay Isparana, you were best to stick to that which you know best, easy-girl! You forget that two nights from this is the Night of Ishtar, who is worshipped by the queen . . . and the Time of the Equilibration of Derketo, beloved of the king's mistress! The streets will be full of people bearing torches, and Hisarr Zul is sure to keep close to that palatial home of his. Nay — we will just take the amulet from his coffers on to-morrow night!"





2.

At the
Keep of
Hisarr Zul

Many peoples of several lands thronged the streets of Arenjun. They flowed in a river of color amid the temples and darker domains of Zamora's myriad strange gods. Some did or sought to do business, straightforward or no, legal or otherwise. Some spied, for this or that priest or anxious noblewoman, or foreign ruler or priest or hopeful little baron. Some made assignations, for themselves or their masters or mistresses. Many gossiped, so that the market place of Arenjun gave off the sound of a great hive of bees. Among the topics was Zamora's king: having formed the habit of drunkenness during the rule of Yara the priest who had died in the inexplicable toppling of his Elephant Tower, my lord King seemed unable to break the habit. He drank as much or more than ever. None was sure now who ruled in Zamora, and who in Arenjun must not be crossed; at least when all knew that Yara was the power, they knew of whom to be wary!

Others in Arenjun walked about observing, asking casual questions, pondering, reconnoitering. These were planning thefts, and among them was Conan of Cimmeria.

Today he wore no fine cloak, and gone was his thrice-torn tunic of blue silk. As they could be sewn on another garment, the cloth-of-gold borders had brought him a pittance. His casual questions and observances told him little more about Hisarr Zul than he'd overheard last night.

The man was presumably a mage; a wizard at any rate. He kept much to himself within a walled little estate at the edge of Arenjun opposite that where lay the ruins of Yara's once-bright tower.

There were low-voiced rumors of Hisarr Zul's guards, but no specifics were available. The home of Hisarr Zul was not robbed. No one knew anyone who knew the man, who had indeed come here some ten years ago. From Zamboula? Perhaps; who knew? Who cared? Hmm . . . in point of fact, another man with an accent was asking about him today, too. . . . You don't come from the capital do you, a king's spy in those ragtag mendicant's clothes? Here — have a cup of wine, big "beggar" (one can never be too careful) . . .

Making his way through the city, the ragtag beggar with the smoldering blue eyes and square-clipped black mop discovered the sprawling domain of Hisarr Zul.

He saw no activity within the walls. He saw no one enter the gate and saw no one depart. He heard no animal-sounds from within the grounds and smelled no such odors, though he listened and sniffed, for he recalled the lions that had guarded the verdant grounds of Yara's keep.

Two things Conan had of the adventure of the Elephant Tower: the excellent rope of dead Taurus of Nemedia — and more caution. He spent hours at the reconnoitering of Hisarr's walled keep, though he seemed only to be wandering, begging. Within, the manse was impressive and strange. It was builded of stone and corpse-pale marble, a pale sprawl, brooding and seemingly demon-haunted, with windows like flatly faceted amethysts.

"You're a big strapping lad, damn you!" a one-legged man snarled. "Why do you interfere

in the business of those who need alms? Do something! Go steal, damn you!”

That evening a cloak, worn but serviceable against night-chill, vanished from off a sleeping man just outside the Maul. The cloak was of red, faded by age and wear and weather to a rusty pallor. A bit later, a big man doffed that cloak and thrust it betwixt a skinny, gnarly tree and the base of Hisarr Zul’s stone wall.

He stood in the darkness clad only in a loose, short, sleeveless tunic laced up the front and girt with a big swordbelt. From it depended a long dagger sheath on a thong; his old leather sheath was slung across his back so that his sword hilt stood up behind his left shoulder. Fastened inside the ill-got cloak was his pouch of coins, which he could not trust not to jingle during the coming venture in thievery. They were safer here in the shadows against Hisarr’s avoided wall than anywhere in that thieves’ den called the Maul!

His sandals he left, too, between wall and tree.

Also at his belt hung a pouch of tools and the excellent rope that had belonged to Taurus the Nemedian. Woven from the tresses of dead women taken by Taurus from their tombs at midnight, that older thief had told the Cimmeric, and steeped in the deadly wine of the upas tree to give it strength. Even bigger than Conan, Taurus had avowed that the rope would bear three times his weight.

Conan would not test it just now. The wall was only ten feet high.

First he looked carefully about, peering into the darkness. Hisarr’s keep was set apart from

contaminating neighbors. Conan saw nothing, heard no one. He moved away from the wall, at a crouch, still wary. His observations earlier had shown him no sunlit flashes from the wall's top; it was not imbedded with shards of steel or bits of glass, then.

Could it be true that eight or nine good thieves had quietly announced plans to rob this place, over the last few years, and that none was ever seen again?

Well, they weren't Cimmerians.

Ten feet away, Conan wheeled, ran, leaped, and slapped both hands atop the stone barrier. Bare feet helped him up mortared old rock, and in seconds he lay atop the wall, which was over a foot thick. He remained there for some time, alert and listening, striving to send forth his very eyes as rays of light to pierce the darkness. Though his hearing, like his other senses, was unusually keen, the battle-born Cimmerian saw, heard, smelled nothing menacing.

The moon, just now on the other side of Arenjun, was the merest crescent. He congratulated himself — as if he'd had a choice — on choosing well the time of his invasion; on the night of the morrow the streets would be full of religious revellers and their torches and eerie humming murmurs — punctuated by screams supposed to denote fervor.

He heard nothing, saw nothing. Silence lay over the brooding keep of Hisarr Zul like a black blanket. The double-winged, two-story manse bulked silent, forty feet away, a pale place that might lair liches and drying mummies. Conan

saw no light. He had noted one on the far side in the other wing, which was why he was where he was, amid dead shadows outside dark windows.

Forty feet of sod, grassy and beshrubbed with bushy evergreens, like shadow-sentinels rearing in the night. Near them might lie fallen needles to pierce and slow bare feet. He'd skirt them, then; it was dark enough that a man needn't seek tree-shadows. Forty feet. There might be dogs, traps, lions — unknown guardians. He considered. Creeping, skulking, he was as likely to arouse such guardians as on the run. In this darkness he was no less likely to spring traps. And skulking, he's have less chance of escaping trap or sentinels, human or otherwise.

He dropped into Hisarr's grounds with hardly a sound.

Crouching, he was able to see less than he had from atop the wall. No matter. He'd marked every tree, and the house, and his path. He took a deep breath — and ran, as though a dozen demons pursued him.

Seconds later he was beside the house, and hardly winded. Nothing had happened. The only sound was his own breathing. Hisarr Zul either had no defenses as had Yara, or — the Cimmerician, racing with such swift silence, had aroused none. Good! Beside the house, Conan looked up.

Would this conveniently-located window open?

No. Of course not; Nothing was *that* easy. He moved on. This one? No. He considered breaking it. No. Though the only light he'd seen was

over in the other wing, he'd not risk the noise of shattering glass — which was nigh opaque, and amethystine in hue. The Cimmerian moved on beside the lich-pale wall. A shrub seemed to lean toward him and, superstitiously, his nape and armpits prickling, Conan avoided it in a wide semi-circuit. Was Hisarr a mage?

Another window, also purplish, also impenetrable to his glower, also secured from within.

Directly over his head loomed a small round balcony. Perhaps Hisarr stood there to watch the sunset. Perhaps its door . . .

Conan's pouch was stuffed with wrapped tools wedged with pieces of sponge, against noise. After removing it from his belt, he tied its thongs to one end of Taurus's rope. Conan stepped back, and back, keeping close to the house. Panic threatened when he backed into the shrub he'd suspected of some impossible sentience. He was wrong. It was only a tall evergreen bush.

The balcony was more than ten feet above the ground. That second story must have mighty thick floors, judging from the height of windows and balcony! An iron safety railing surrounded it. Conan squinted. The vertical bars of iron were thumb-thick, and spaced about eight inches apart. Conan aimed, tested and corrected his stance, wound up, aimed, and threw his tool-pouch. The rope streamed out behind it.

He muttered curses when the pouch struck one of the uprights and rebounded. He caught it without a clink.

"Try to hit one of those little rods and I'd miss nine in ten times!"

His second throw was more forceful, and only generally aimed. Trailing the ill-gained rope, the pouch rushed between two iron bars, across four feet of balcony, and plunged between two bars on the other side. Conan's grip of the rope stopped the pouch a foot short of the ground. He let it down, dropped his end of the rope. There was plenty of slack.

He secured the pouch-end of the rope to a low, skinny, deciduous shrub just out of its infancy. He knew it was dangerously weak. Taking a deep breath, he wiped his palms on his tunic at the thighs, spat into them, rubbed them together again. He backed away, on the side of the balcony opposite the tethered rope.

A running start and his leap enabled his left hand to catch the rope nine feet off the ground. A powerful yank and swing enabled him to slap his right hand onto the balcony's floor. He brought his left hand up beside it. He had moved swiftly enough to avoid tearing the little shrub out of the ground, though he'd felt it give.

Clever, Cimmerian, he mused. Now there's a railing in the way of a swing-up!

Precisely because he was a Cimmerian, and inordinately strong besides, he solved that problem: he gripped one iron upright at its base. Then another. He gripped the first one higher up. Not without grunts, he dragged himself up thus, by sheer strength of corded muscles.

On the balcony, he brought up the hair-rope and took it around two vertical bars. Laying hold of it with both hands, he braced himself, and pulled. He grunted, pulled . . . When he felt the

little shrub's roots start to yield, he re-braced his feet before returning his strength to his task. That part of the plan worked; the young plant's roots tore free of the earth, and the cessation of resistance did not hurt the Cimmerian, whose backside was already touching the railing.

He reeled in his pouch of tools. The shrub came along. Detaching it, Conan wound up and threw with such strength that the root-heavy shrub fell to earth well beyond the wall he'd just come over.

Now, he thought while he methodically refastened the pouch and coiled the rope, *those perverse Zamorian gods will surely ensure that the balcony's door is securely locked, after all!*

This was an occasion on which being wrong did not make the barbarian unhappy. The narrow door that gave from house onto balcony was not locked. Conan entered the home of Hisarr Zul.

Despite his many cares, he was still the impetuous youth who'd have died under Yara's lions but for the Nemedian thief: he had no idea where in this house of two two-storied wings the Eye of Erlik might be — and he had no idea what the thing looked like.

He had made certain surmises. An amulet meant a smallish object, probably on a thong or chain. As its true owner was a king or rather satrap, surely it was a chain, not a thong, and likely a golden chain at that. Why was it called the Eye of Erlik? Well . . . most likely it was a figurine. Erlik, the Yellow God of Death, had yellow or greenish-yellow eyes. A little figurine then, on a

gold chain, with topazes or pale emeralds for eyes. And surely it would be wrought of gold.

Having thus logically worked it out in his own mind, Conan assumed his conclusions to be true. Next: Where would it be?

Not in plain sight, surely — but not in a treasure chest stored away, either. This room neither felt nor smelled lived in. On the assumption that Hisarr would keep such a treasure somewhere near to hand, to gloat over, Conan found the door and departed the chamber.

Minutes later he was moving along a corridor lit dimly by a dragon-shaped oil lamp slung from the ceiling on a brazen chain. Impatient with himself and his lack of knowledge, he had decided to discover and mark Hisarr's whereabouts, in order to search elsewhere for the amulet.

Hearing that was almost preternaturally keen apprised him of the approach of stealthy footsteps. Two swift barefoot paces carried Conan to a door; he pushed it open cautiously to reveal one more of too many rooms, all unlit. This one seemed bare but for a huge statue that appeared to be of jade, and a big black chest that probably contained the paraphernalia of this god's worship. From inside, with the door not quite closed, the Cimmerian watched the passage of a man he realized was familiar: the easterner from the inn last night! A thief, surely, as the fellow had responded to Conan's invocation of the thieves' god.

Staring, Conan remembered that he'd been told another foreigner had been asking questions

this day, about Hisarr Zul. He had naturally assumed the man to be Karamek of Zamboula, despite a sponge-pedlar's remark that the man was surely from doubly distant Iranistan. Conan knew nothing of that land. Zamboula lay far south of Arenjun, with desert between. Iranistan was even farther south, wasn't it?

Wondering if his presence and that of the man in the sleeved, striped shirt and khilat were coincident or if the Iranistani was also on a mission concerning the amulet, Conan watched the other man pass. The corridor with its pink-tiled floor ran straight for twenty feet before it reached the manse's center, and branched. The Cimmerian waited. When he was convinced that the other man should have turned, he peered out. The corridor was empty.

Conan was just about to slip out of his refuge when he heard more footsteps, coming from the same direction as had the Iranistani; the direction in which Conan had been headed.

Crom! The corridor was as busy as the market-place at noon-time! Conan eased back, eased the door to within an inch of closure.

This time he watched the approach of three men in martial livery: silent, grimly purposeful men. All wore spike-topped helmets, jerkins of silvery scale-mail over green-bordered white tunics, and greaves in the Corinthian manner. Each bore a sword naked in his fist and wore a sheathed dagger as well. They carried no bucklers. The watching barbarian stared.

These guardsmen of Hisarr Zul were . . . weird, horripilating. They plodded along



without a word, as if brainless, each with dull fixed eyes set in stupidity? — no, hopelessness! They looked like over-whipped dogs or refugees from some legion of lost souls. Yet . . . they were purposeful, too; single-minded in their quiet pacing. Why, their buskins were soled with the sponge brought so expensively across from the sea, for the lining of helmets!

They passed, following the Iranistani whether by chance or design. Again Conan set himself to wait. Those men did not look alert; indeed they appeared drugged. He felt that with his stealth he could step forth and be on his way in the opposite direction without their ever turning to notice — but he was in no such hurry. He'd not risk it. He waited.

When he looked, the third of that eerie trio was vanishing along the leftward corridor. Conan heaved a sigh, wiped his palms, and left the room.

He had taken eight stealthy steps when the dinsome clamor arose, from behind him.

He wheeled to see nothing. The noise continued, emanating from the leftward branch of the corridor: iron clangs, one of metal on metal and another of deflected blade raking wall. The Iranistani, Conan thought, may or may not have found what he sought. Of far more importance to him was that the zombie-like sentries had found him.

The sounds of battle continued. The Cimmerian could visualize it: the trousered foreigner at bay in the narrow hall, and — if he were good with that sword-long knife of his — holding the

guardsmen back, for the corridors were not wide enough to allow them to attack other than close-bunched.

Not my business. Conan thought. The Irani-stani's only a rival thief. Too, I have much more freedom, with him keeping those three busy. Better I go and see whence Hisarr emerges to investigate the clamor — and I will search the room he's been in!

The thought was intelligent, reasoned, and worthy of any thief with his mind on his business.

The Cimmerian, however, did not even turn back to resume his investigations. Last night the trousered foreigner in the leather vest had aided him. Maybe his shouted warning and blade-use had not been necessary. Nevertheless, the man had done it. Whether thieves had codes or no, the men of Cimmeria did.

Barefoot, Conan sprinted up the corridor toward the sounds of combat, and he reached up and back to draw his sword as he ran.

He turned the corner to see precisely what he'd visualized: the backs of three sentries. Beyond them the rather short, dark Iranistani held them at bay, though sore beset and surely fated to be struck down.

Conan struck as suddenly and murderously as a tiger lunging out of the dark, though as he charged he could not resist shouting, "Up Bel!"

"Hoho! Up Bel indeed, big one! Ah! Whoever you are, Ajhindar of Ir-uh!-anistan has never had a boon so swiftly — huh! — returned!"

The battle was very short. Indeed, it proved no battle at all.

Two of the uniformed guards turned at Conan's voice, silent and blank-eyed and eerily purposeful. The third was just striking at Ajhindar the Iranistani. As he was to the Cimmerian's left, the latter kept the two now facing him at bay by slashing savagely at their face level so that one jerked back and the other squatted under the stroke — which terminated with Conan's edge slamming into the side of the third man's neck. The blade bit through to sever bone, half-beheading the sentry.

"Nicely done!" Ajhindar called, and altered the direction of his own stroke so as to take the middle man almost identically. And one foeman remained. Into his path fell the man Ajhindar had nigh-beheaded, and the slash at Conan's right side and back came to naught; "nicely done" or no, the Cimmerian was having trouble extricating his blade from the bones of his prey's neck.

Ajhindar booted his victim out of the way; half-turning, Conan brought his blood-streaming blade out of his kill and back so viciously that it missed the chin of his fellow thief by inches. The guardsman ducked under that blurred sweep.

"Ho! Careful there, big one — don't really know your own strength, do you? Hooh!"

He'd caught hilt and knuckles in his left forearm, as the third man tried to strike in the crowded hall and Ajhindar stepped in too close to be sword-struck. Simultaneously then: The sentry's left arm swept around with his dagger aimed at Ajhindar's side; Ajhindar's trousered leg jerked up between the man's thighs; Conan struck off the hand holding the dagger so that it dangled by

a few shreds of scarlet flesh. The severed artery continued to pump in long scarlet squirts that showered wall and floor.

"Fast, too," Ajhindar grunted, steeping back as the sentry he'd crotch-kneed came bending helplessly forward, too agonized even to scream because of his severed hand. The Iranistani kicked him in the face, whirled aside, and sword-chopped the man in the back of the neck.

He had to wrench, to extricate his long blade from the Ilbars Mountains.

"Well! With the exception of that stroke of yours to the wrist — for which thanks, big one — very neat! We seem to have left all three with half a neck apiece and no windpipe or jugular at all! I'm glad I helped you last night, friend. I've told you my name — yours?"

"I am Conan, a Cimmerian."

"Ah, the black hair and blue eyes, yes. Cimmeria, eh? Grow them big up in those hills, don't they? Conan of Cimmeria: my thanks."

"Merely a return favor for last night, Ajhindar of Iranistan."

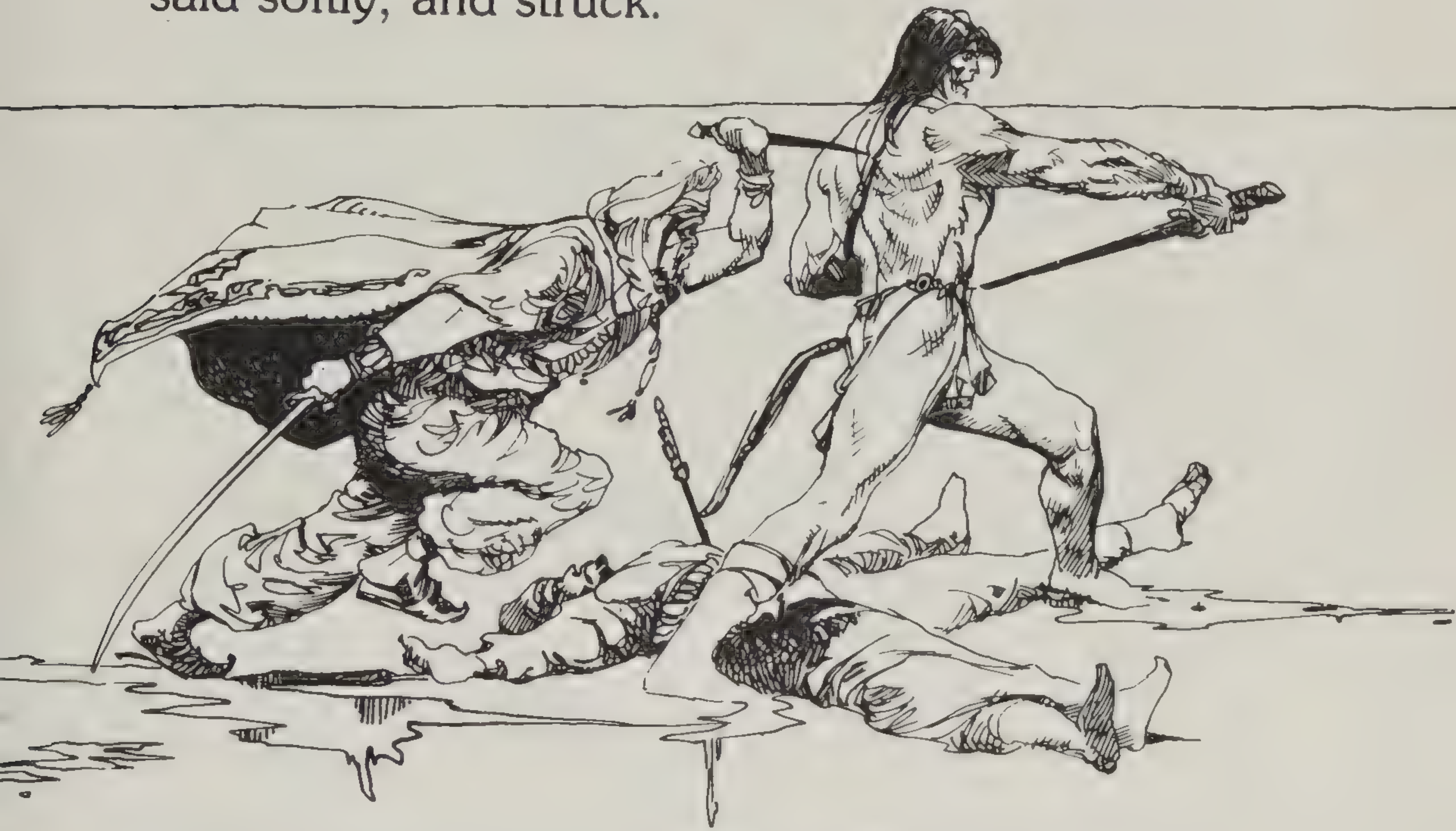
The two men grinned grimly at each other. At their feet, corpses twitched and jerked and pink tiles went much darker. With his left hand, the loquacious Ajhindar checked within a tear in his trousers-leg. His fingers came away red.

"Uh! Bastard pinked me. A piece of his nice white tunic will bandage it nicely enough, if I can find any white left — wonder which one it was? Conan — why come you here this night?" Ajhindar was still smiling.

"For a certain *amulet*," Conan told his new

friend, happy to have one and of such prowess and good humor besides, “dear to a certain desert-bound king. And yourself?”

“Ah gods, I feared you’d say that,” Ajhindar said softly, and struck.



Only the fact that the Iranistani’s foot slipped in a sentry’s blood saved Conan then, for he had not been caught so by surprise since he was thirteen. The foot did slip; the blood-dripping Ilbarisi knife did swing out wider than its owner intended; Conan was able to avoid it. The slash aimed for his neck missed him — almost. Instead of chopping into the base of the bullish neck, it carried away a ragged piece of russet tunic-sleeve and a smaller patch of skin, from a wound no deeper than the thickness of a fingernail.

Conan spun completely, so that when he again faced the Iranistani it was at a distance of three

feet. Conan's left shoulder oozed blood; his sword was held low, angled up.

"Damn!" Ajhindar said, almost smiling.

"A friendship as swiftly broached as gained, *friend*," Conan said, low and throaty. "Why this?"

"You must know: I'm here on the same mission. My employer is my own king. Yours?"

"Me."

"Damn again! Just a thief?"

Conan nodded. The man's easygoing manner and his treachery had hurt far more than the nick of his sword; Conan was bitterly disappointed.

"Join me then, friend Conan. My king will be grateful to my friend who aided me in bringing to him . . . the amulet."

Conan considered only for seconds. "After the treachery you just showed me? I'd be afraid to sleep, or turn my back, *friend*."

Ajhindar sighed. "And from what I've seen of you, just now and last night, I suspect you're not ready to say 'Oh, sorry Ajhy . . . you take the Eye whilst I go along home empty handed.' Am I right?"

"You are right, *friend*."

"Ah, you're bitter. That's youth, of course. But look here, the place is full of valuables. All yours. I want only the amulet —"

"So do I."

"Damn. And, from what I've seen of your prowess, I suspect too that my best chance against you is already taken — to remove you without chancing a fight."

The Cimmerian said, "Right again, former

friend. Now — we have made noise, and surely someone's heard. I will stand away whilst you head for the nearest window, for I've no desire to slay you."

The Iranistani still looked sad. He wagged his head. "Out the nearest window . . . and go along home empty-handed, eh?"

"Right, friend. Empty-handed . . . but alive."

Ajhindar heaved a sigh. He kept his gaze on the Cimmerian while he squatted and, by feel, armed his left hand with a dagger its owner was past using.

"Afraid I cannot do that, friend Conan. I'm on a royal mission, you see. And watched. Loyalty, fear of reprisals, and so on. Is it true you Cimmerians are barbarians?"

"So we're called."

"Damn! And big too, and good. Well . . ."

Ajhindar turned away slump-shouldered . . . and whirled to charge, long knife extended and dagger coming up to catch a man he knew was swift enough to duck.

Conan would not be caught twice by surprise, like some stupid Arenjuni watchman whose experience came solely from the practice field. Already he was embarrassed at nearly dying to Ajhindar's first trick. This time he struck away the other man's long knife with his own sword; dodged the dagger and twisted in so that Ajhindar's wrist struck his swordbelt — and kicked the Iranistani in the left leg, hard.

Ajhindar fought a moment for balance. With nothing but air to flail, he went down — hard — and his left elbow struck the corridor wall,

also hard. The dagger leaped from his hand in a nerve spasm, as if spring-mounted. Sitting on the floor with his back against the wall just beside a door with a ridiculously low-set lock, he gazed up at the Cimmerian.

Conan had not followed up. He still did not want to kill this man. He was a long way from the shark-like man he'd become.

"Damn," Ajhindar said, looking mildly up at him. "You are fast and good, big one. That dagger did me no more good than it did its original owner. I suggest you do not take it up as spoils. The thing's accursed." He heaved a sigh. "Well."

"A *barbarian* offers you the chance to get up and go, Ajhindar; there is a bond between us. No, do not expect me to come within reach of your feet. I lost a fight once because I thought I had won, and was ankle-kicked. Never again."

Ajhindar showed the Cimmerian a rueful grin and shook his head. He did not attempt to disguise his open admiration. "How old were you, big one . . . ten?"

"Eleven."

Ajhindar chuckled. "I believe you!"

With another sigh, the Iranistani started to rise. His hilt slipped on the tiles, so that he tilted and fell sidewise against the low-mounted lock of the door beside him. Instantly, with a click and a little thunking sound, a panel dropped open in the door, like a drawer. It was at shin level, had Ajhindar been standing. As he was not, the two Kharami asps that emerged from their niche behind the panel bit the Iranistani on the face and



neck, twice each within four seconds.

Jerking, groaning and looking horribly surprised rather than in pain, Ajhindar showed no terror. He let go his sword and grasped a yellow-banded viper in each hand. He hurled both serpents at Conan — who sidestepped and, very neatly, sliced both flying reptiles in twain without striking either wall or floor with his blade. Four sections of serpent struck the corridor wall opposite the Iranistani and dropped to writhe on the floor. The unshod Cimmerian kept out of the way.

“You’re the worst friend I ever made, Ajhindar of Iranistan.”

“Aye, I suppose. And dead, too. Damn! All because I slipped . . . Well, that’s that. Friend Conan, you know I’ve minutes, only. Do give listen without question. My employer is Kobad Shah, king of Iranist — oh!”

Ajhindar shuddered and leaned back against the door of death. Conan saw that already the asps’ particularly nasty venom, so potent it was milked for use on assassins’ daggers and some arrowheads, was at work. The little trickle from a thumb-thick swelling that ran up Ajhindar’s neck showed that one set of hollow teeth had sunk directly into his jugular.

Minutes? No, Conan thought. The man had seconds.

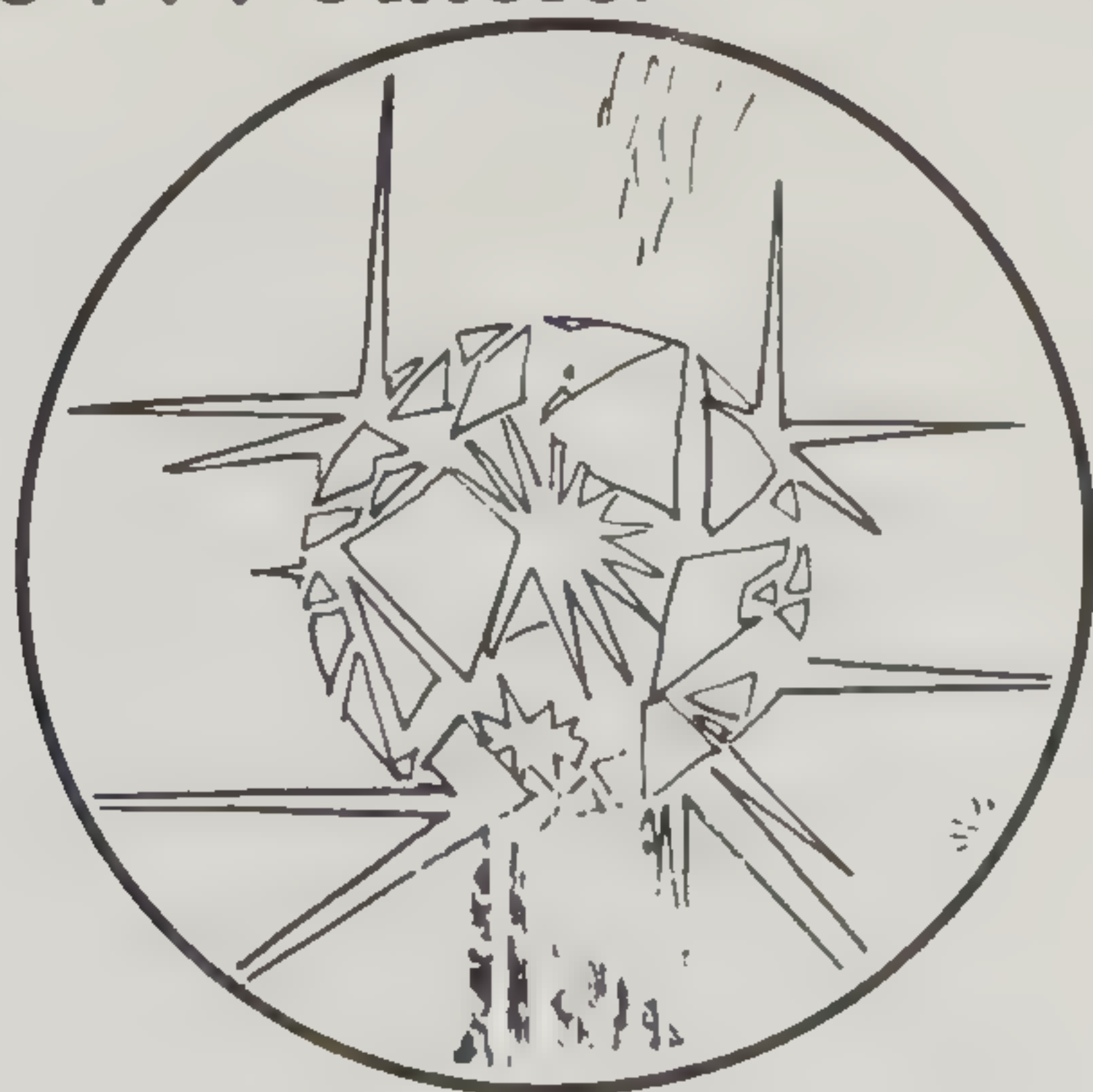
“Kobad Shah will pay much for what you seek, lad. *Much*. Don’t be foolish enough to deal with a common Arenjuni fence. You know you have to — *uh!*” Again a shudder seized the stricken man. His face was darkening even as

it swelled. His arms twitched. “— have to flee,” he said in a lower voice, and words were becoming harder for him to form and expel. “Aren-j-junnn . . . take the Eye . . . to — to Koobad . . . straight down this h-hall . . . the dainty little blade you s-sseeek is . . . in a case . . . in the gr-gre-e-eennn . . . rooommmmkh.”

Ajhindar of Iranistan slid down the door, purple-black of face, his tongue out, his dark eyes huge and staring. The hand he had tried to raise to his chest had never got there.

Conan gusted a sigh. “Kobad Shah didn’t give you much, friend. Just death far from home, by Morrigan! We will see who I deal with.” He glanced about. “Meanwhile,” he muttered low, “we’ve been about as soundless as a herd of horses!”

And barefoot, the Cimmerian stepped across and around blood and four human corpses, to seek out the amulet called Eye of Erlik. In his brain as a question lingered Ajhindar’s phrase: “. . . the dainty little blade we seek . . . ?” Meaningless. Whatever it might mean, and whatever form the Eye took, it would be his, and a dear prize; it had cost the lives this night of one good man and three . . . others.





3.

In the Green Room

Following the path that had been Ajhindar's, Conan of Cimmeria reached the end of the corridor and faced a paneled door. This one had no low-set lock such as that which had resulted in the Iranistani's death, but the Cimmerian was wary nevertheless. He sword-prodded the door's handle and the panel around it ere he pulled up the brass handle and kicked the door open with the ball of his foot. His sword remained in his hand, unwiped.

The room he revealed was sprawling huge, floored with green tiles like leaves shaken from trees before their time. Dark tapestries clung to pale green walls. From a ceiling supported by columns of green-shot porphyry twinklingly alive with feldspar crystals, velvet drapes hung to the floor. They were the color of cedar trees, save for one wine-red one in the corner.

Toward the center of the room squatted a long low table and a longer, high one topped with a stone slab. On that slab clustered a seeming hodgepodge of formidable crucibles and rune-incused aludels formed of ochre earthenware; a thurible seemingly of gold and alembics foully colored by the noxious-looking fluids they contained. A little square casket of crystal, braced with brass, had been broken into a thousand shards that gleamed and glittered in the light of a hanging triple lamp molded in the form of genitalia.

Against a wall squatted an athenor, black and dull like a comminatory dwarf of iron. Conan saw that the room was cut by one window, covered by a heavy drape the color of pine needles.

Round about loomed strange and horrific statues of night-black onyx and porphyry and mica-glittering basalt. Even those anthropomorphic ones were not quite representative of human subjects. They were kept company by a loathly mummy, umber with age and standing propped erect, gaunt and menacing of tetanic face and exanimate form. On the long table two purulent-looking tapers had been lit, and they burned with a stench as if their tallow came from the inhabitants of tombs.

Here was no adyton of gods; here was the inner domain and trove of a sorcerous wizard and his dark gods or otherworld demons.

Here too were two people.

They did not belong. Both were tawny of skin, black of hair and eyes. The man wore a dark red tunic over a long-sleeved shirt of black, and black leggings vanishing into soft black boots. The dull garb of a night-thief more cautious than the barbarian he stared at, and a nose like a hunting falcon.

The woman's shirt, too, was black, and her tunic a deep forest green. Its border was fretted with scarlet and she, like Conan, was barefoot. Huge wire circles swung silver from the tiny rings piercing her ears and her eyes were darkly kohled above a straight nose and lips red as cinabar and liquid-looking as the strange metal it produced. Her brocaded belt was clasped with agate.

In her right hand she held a small hammer, its head cloth-wrapped. From her left, on a circle of gold chain, swung a tiny golden sword. A pen-



dant — or an amulet.

The dainty little blade we seek . . .

“Erlik’s beard!” she gasped. “Is *that* one of his guardians? He’s big enough to stalk bears with naught but a thorn as weapon!”

Conan hefted his sword. Their stares swerved to the red-smeared blade.

“It’s a three-foot thorn, Isparana. I am not anxious to use it more this night. Crom, what a house full of rogues this is! Just throw that bauble over here, along the floor, and I’ll stand still and watch you two leave. Best make tracks for Zamora this very night.” He could not resist showing off his knowledge. “Tell your khan I have another offer for his amulet . . . and whilst I decide between it and his doubtless generous one, he’d best have Balad slain. Just in case.”

“You know very much, blue-eyes,” the man said. He drew his sword and his knees bent. “Enough to know that we cannot give you the . . . ‘bauble.’ ”

The Cimmerian sighed, a bit elaborately. “I’ve no quarrel with you, Karamek. Is there to be no end of killing here, this night?”

The man looked thirty; the woman five or more years less. Her eyes were very wide. She was well constructed and a bit more than pretty.

“Erlik’s name,” she whispered, “you have slain *Hisarr Zul*?”

“No. Just three of his sentries . . . and another thief.”

“Bent on gaining the Eye?”

“That,” Conan said, “is no concern of yours.”

Elbow crooked, sword up and ready, he paced

into the room. He extended his left hand, though only a little, with his elbow at his side. Karamek's sword was after all drawn. "Just toss the amulet."

She clutched it the tighter. "Karamek —"

"Hush, Ispa. *Back* to the door we used. Out, down, and away. If I'm not at the gate within an hour — ride!"

"Karamek —" She was unsure, though she'd started to back. The prize swung from her tight-clenched fist.

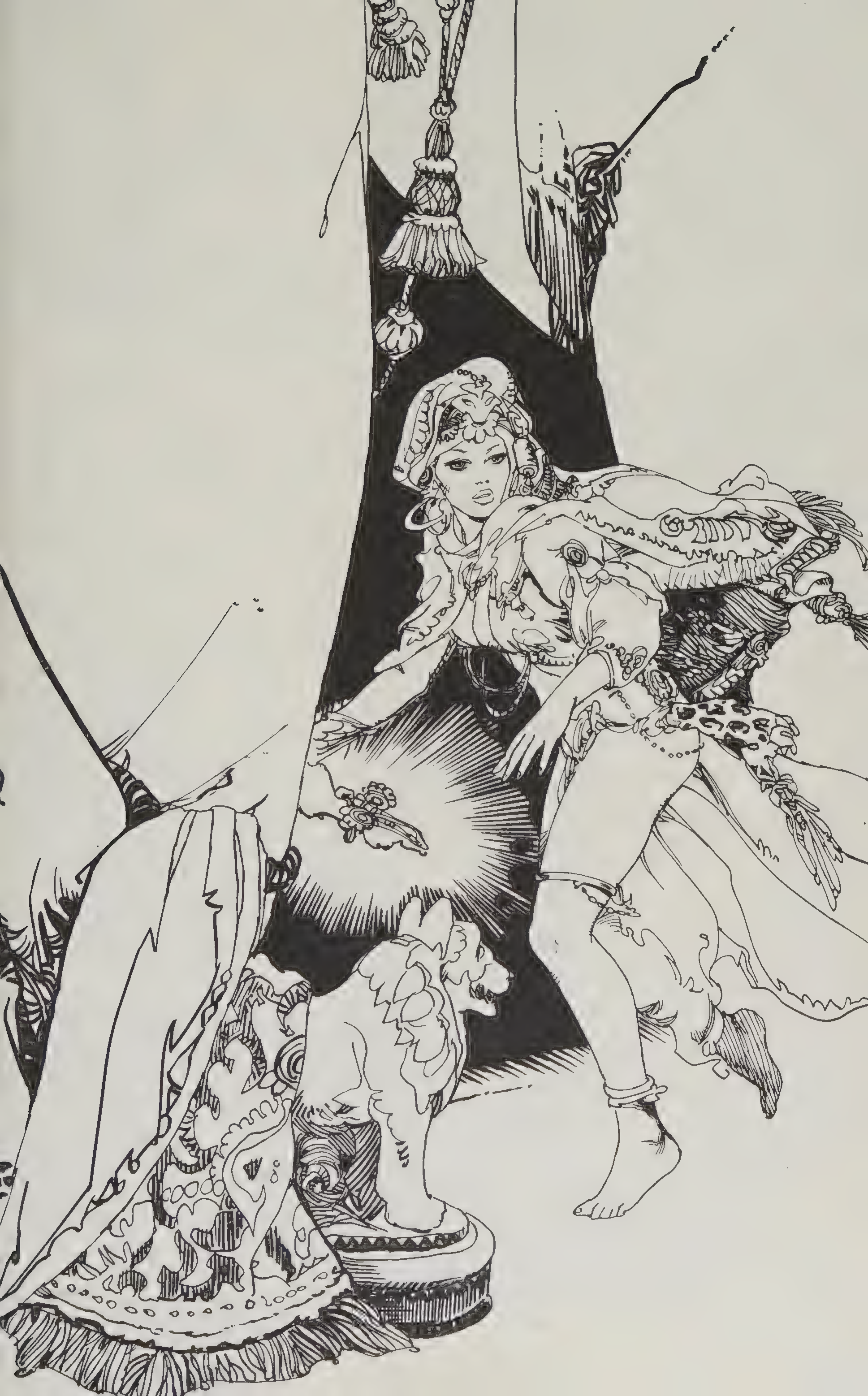
Conan started his charge.

Karamek pounced into his path, knees bent, face ugly. Conan had gained momentum; Karamek slashed. Only the Cimmerian's fair hurling himself aside saved him from that hard-swung, drawing stroke. Behind him, Isparana turned and ran. She passed through an open doorway in the room's far leftward corner. Conan, with a wild slash in Karamek's direction, followed at the run. He reached the door just as it slammed with a double thump. His only choices now were to whirl or be slain from behind.

He wheeled about just in time to parry Karamek's running slash.

The Zamboulan's racing momentum and the force of his blow carried him past. Slamming a hand against the wall for balance, Conan thrust a leg out. The Zamboulan tripped, crashed into the wall. A tapestry of blood-colored velvet came loose in his hand and dropped over him. Conan stabbed into that moving lump of tapestry, three times, and his blade was newly smeared and again dripping.

The falling Karamek pulled the tapestry the



rest of the way down, atop his twitching, kicking body. A shinier red oozed out from beneath the wine-hued velvet.

The Cimmerian was already trying the slab of a door through which Isparana had fled. It was locked. With a snarled curse, he threw his shoulder against it. From the way it sprang back after yielding only a little, he knew the door was stoutly barred against him.

The word for excrement streamed from the Cimmerian's lips in three languages as he turned and ran across the green room toward its single narrow window. Thought she'd escape him by barring a door, did she? He would damned well —

A section of floor slipped away beneath his feet and, erect, he dropped three feet onto a surface below. The fact that the apparent thickness of the second story's floor had been explained was of no interest to the grunting Cimmerian. The trap door closed on his thighs — and held him fast.

Even while he struggled, Conan knew that Isparana had made good her escape, with the Eye. Nor did it seem likely that he'd be there in time to find her waiting at the city's gate. He could not free himself. His attempts to gain freedom by lunging, twisting, and at last prying at the resolutely closed panel succeeded only in bloodying his thighs — and costing him the last two inches of his sword's blade. That brought more curses.

He was caught in a superbly designed trap, set to catch anyone coming in the window by which the Cimmerian had sought to exit. Calling up the name of every god he could think of, Conan



snarled a litany of curses and obscenities.

For what seemed hour upon tortoise-crawling hour, Conan remained trapped. The while, he cursed himself and Hisarr Zul and the two Zamboulans with equal zeal.

And then a man came into the room. He examined the tables, and came to stand staring at the Cimmerian.

“By Hanuman, see what I’ve caught — a bear-sized wolf in my little trap!”

Conan glowered in silence. *Swears by Hanuman the Accursed of Zamboula, does he? Well, come closer old dog, and even pointless my sword will . . .*

But no, it would not. Slay this man and Conan might never leave the place. The prospect of remaining here, the tiled iron of the flooring pinning his thighs, while he grew delirious with hunger and thirst and eventually died the black-tongued death . . . no. Conan would gladly pass his sword over hilt-first and take his chances weaponless but with his legs free.

Eyes stared down at him, eyes deep and dark as the interstellar gulfs that yawned black and infinite between the wan far stars.

A long tunic of ochre samite covered Hisarr Zul to the ankles. Its chest was bedight with fretted scrollwork of gold thread, set here and there with opals and some gleaming stones of a warm saffron. His strapless sandals were the color of earth; his bracelet was multiply punctured gold; and five rings flashed from his fingers, four with stones of as many hues.

He was slender of shoulder and hip, was Hisarr

Zul, and only the beginning of a paunch slightly rounded the drape of his body-formed, ungirt tunic. His eyes were large and dark and exigent, a bit protruberant and starey. Above a wide, high forehead hair like gleaming jet sprang back in gray-shot waves from a central point like an inverted spear-head.

Hands behind his back, Hisarr Zul paced about his trapped guest.

His skin was smooth in appearance, with an amber-like sheen, as if glazed. His age was indeterminate; he was above forty. A small, neat moustache seemed to spring directly from his nostrils and was side-trimmed so as to form a flattened triangle from upper lip to nose. His beard, too, was geometric though rounded; it formed a thick-hafted spear of black, aimed downward.

The slightly exophthalmic eyes stared at Conan. Behind, Hisarr Zul's hair showed an unruly curl or two, for all his back-sweeping of it. He was of average height and his voice was a sonorous baritone.

"So. You slew my guards *and* my pretty snakes, after they'd removed your partner."

"I came alone. So did the Iranistani."

"Ah, everyone came to visit Hisarr Zul tonight, eh? And where is the amulet?"

"On its way to Zamboula, in the hands of a woman."

"A *third* thief!" Hisarr Zul's brows rose so that his dark eyes bulged the more. "And it's she who succeeded, eh?"

"Four," Conan corrected. "There lies

another — her partner.”

“Hanuman’s . . . head,” the wizard breathed, on a descending note. He followed the direction of Conan’s nod, and paced over to the velvet-draped corpse. On his face was an expression of considerable distaste, but he squatted to draw back the cloth until he had bared the pain-frozen face of Karamek of Zamboula.

“Of Zamboula?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm.” Hisarr rose and turned to gaze on Conan, one hand raised, toying with his little beard. “You and the Iranistani slew the guards. Did you two fight?”

“Yes.”

“Ah. And you downed him. I wondered how the fool had got himself bitten in the face and neck. And so you account for his death, too. And for this one. Doubtless there would be another corpse outside, too, a woman’s, had you not fallen afoul of my trap.”

Conan said nothing, but stared.

“Hmm. A young man, a youth, but big, and ruthless. A man of prowess, youth or no!”

They gazed in silence, each at the other. Measuring. Considering. One seemed infinitely patient; the other had to be.

“Northerner . . . you have cost me considerable, but the Zamboulan costs me more. You must be my agent, now. As such, and for certain compensations . . . beginning with my activating the mechanism that releases you . . . you will go after her, and return the Eye of Erlik to me.”

Conan would have promised anything to get



out of this manse and not be turned over to the city watch. He said, "Aye, Hisarr Zul. I am your man. I'll gladly chase down the Zamboulan wench, for a merciful and generous employer."

"Umm," Hisarr said, studying him thoughtfully. Then he walked around Conan, to the longer table. "Of course every second we delay gives her a longer lead, doesn't it. Surely she has a fast horse or camel."

"Surely, Lord Zul. We must hurry — and I'll need a faster one." *I may well have to ride a hundred or two leagues just to overtake her, the Cimmerian thought. After that, with the amulet and your fast horse, I may as well continue along that same route — to Zamboula, and a doubtless generous khan!*

Smiling, again pacing with his arms behind his back, Hisarr Zul returned to stand before Conan. Then, smiling, he bent forward, revealed that one hand held a thin copper tube, and set it to his lips. He blew a fine yellow dust into the Cimmerian's face. Hisarr then moved hurriedly away.

Conan collapsed in seconds, unable to breathe.

For once, Conan of Cimmeria awoke as civilized men did, drowsy and dull. Too, he felt strangely apprehensive; dolorous; *empty*. The fact that he seemed physically unimpaired did not allay his unease and sensation of malaise, of emptiness. He hardly noted that he no longer held his sword. An inexplicable and undeniable feeling of loss and sadness was on him.

"Tell me your name."

Conan looked into the dark, starey eyes of



Hisarr Zul. "I am Conan," he said low, "a Cimmerian."

"So, Conan of cold Cimmeria. You have just become acquainted with the powder of the black lotus, a delightful and useful blossom from the lost jungles of yellow Khitai."

"I know of it. It is death. Why am I alive?"

"Paralysis is almost instantaneous, Conan of Cimmeria. Death comes in two minutes. I provided an antidote of my own making; to my knowledge, I alone know how to counteract the Yellow Death powder. You have but lain unconscious whiles the antidote aided your — very strong — system in throwing off the venom. Nevertheless, you do not feel . . . quite normal, do you?"

Conan would not answer.

Smiling, Hisarr set his foot at the edge of the panel that held Conan fast. He pressed down with his sandaled toes. The panel opened at once, as simply as that. Conan groaned with the tingling agony kindled in his legs by the return of full circulation. Blood had dried on his thighs in two horizontal lines.

"Get up out of there," Hisarr said.

His face clenched in pain, Conan sat back, pressed with both palms, and backed on his buttocks out of the trap. The wizard lifted his foot. The tile-bonded iron sprang back into place to conceal the trap. Not even the Cimmerian's eyes could see any difference in that section of the floor.

"You might want to rub your legs," Hisarr said, pacing to the higher, longer table. "You

might also want to look into this.”

He returned to hold before the floor-seated Cimmerian a mirror no longer than Conan’s hand, thickened by a small dome of glass or quartz. Conan stared.

“Why would I care about a . . . mirror”

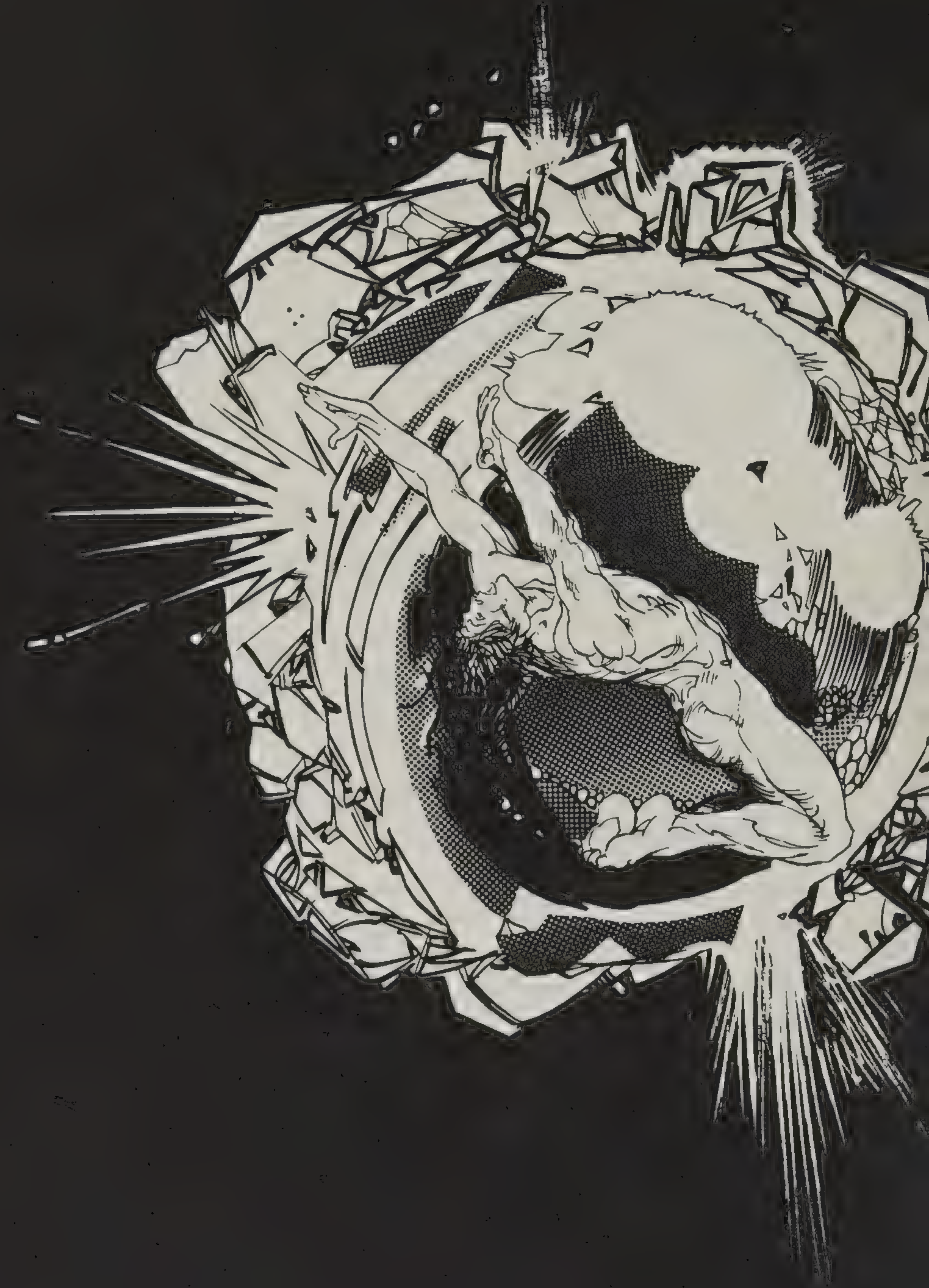
He stared into the reflective glass. First he’d seen his own face, as he had expected. Almost immediately, shifting patterns began to obscure it. The glass seemed to swirl, to liquefy, so that he blinked and could not look away. Then he was gazing upon a tiny man, trapped and fearful, seeking escape from the mirror, seemingly looking beseechingly at him from the other side of a pane of clear glass.

Conan stared. His armpits went prickly. He knew that face; he’d seen the face on that tiny man before . . . it was his own!

“That, Cimmerian, is your soul. It is mine, now. Do as I have said and I will return it to you on the return of my property to me — the amulet called Eye of Erlik. Try to betray me, and I will break that mirror. And —”

Hisarr Zul did no more than tap the mirror. Conan felt an inward wrench. He neither knew nor cared whether it was imagined or a result of those long fingers’ tapping on the container of his . . . soul.

“Be still. If this is broken,” Hisarr said, “your soul is lost forever. Nor can anyone but me remove it from this glass. Would you carry your own soul about with you forever like baggage, Conan of Cimmeria, ever fearful lest someone



break the glass and . . .”

Conan shivered. Then revelation came. “The guards! Blast you for a — your *guards!*”

Clearly identified now as a sorcerer, a thinly smiling Hisarr Zul straightened. Conan’s eyes remained fixed on the fragile piece of glass in one of those long, thin, amber-sheened hands.

“Aye, Conan. Now you know their secret. My guards were soul-less. They too came here as thieves in the night, my dear thief of cold Cimmeria. I took their souls, and broke the mirrors that contained them! What was left served me better.” Hisarr went back to the table of his necromancy. Anxious blue eyes watched him set down the mirror, and Conan breathed a little easier. Only a little.

“Or so I thought,” Hisarr said, turning again to face the barbarian. “Until one of your prowess came and defeated them. Who could foresee *two* thieves’ making successful entry here, on the same night? Hanuman blast you — all *four* of you! Well. These soulless men, always together, totally purposeful though eternally hopeless, were enough to overpower any single thief within these walls. What must be done now requires more. You will be outside, without my direction. Hence . . . I would rather not break this mirror of your soul, Cimmerian. Knowing it is here, you will serve me better, than as a *thing*; a human homunculus that only obeys, without that spark of hope that makes us all ever seek freedom, and volition.”

The sensation of emptiness swelled within Conan. He knew what it meant.

He was soulless, damned and doomed, and he knew that he had discovered that which was worth fearing. Indeed he could not but fear, at prospect of losing forever his very soul, the *ka* and life-force that was he at base, that drove him, that made him unique as an individual, and that would live on after his death.

He knew that he would do precisely as this smiling monster directed. He knew that he would seek the stolen prize that might ease his life for years, if he kept it. He would not keep it. Like a lackey, an employee, a servant of this powerful, plotting mage, he would bring the amulet back here, to trade to Hisarr Zul of Arenjun for that which was worth far more.

Crom and Ymir and all the gods, he thought, nearly whelmed, my Soul!

"You agree of course. Now describe to me what you will be seeking."

"A — a small sword, on a chain of gold."

Gisarr gazed upon him, leaning comfortably back against the long table, braced by his hands.

"Poor fool, you really know no more, do you? Well. Here is its precise likeness. A day more and it would have been *this* bauble that Zamboulan slut made off with! Look well, Conan. Know the Eye of Erlik, that can upset a kingdom . . . two! And as you know now, it is important enough to interest one in Iranistan, as well as this humble displaced Zamboulan of the Empire of Turan."

With a smile that was pure nasty mockery, Hisarr placed a hand on his midsection and bowed. Straightening, he plucked up the amulet that hung on a thong around his neck, beneath

his tunic. He removed it and brought it to the Cimmerian.

“A precise copy, Conan my dear devoted servant, of the Eye of Erlik.”

Conan looked at it, studied it. The Eye of Erlik was a sword-shaped pendant about the length of his least finger. The hilt was capped with a ruby pommel. Each end of the cross-bar guard was set with large yellow stones, barred each with a single black stripe.

Those stones, about an inch apart, seemed to be eyes that stared into his from either side of a long and pointed nose.

“Wear it,” Hisarr said, dropping it into the Cimmerian’s palm. “Perhaps you will find a use for it. Of course, it should be called the Sword of Erlik, or at least the *Eyes*, plural — but the world is not ruled by logic, my barbarian of Cimmeria. Now: once you are on the desert, the first oasis is two days’ hard ride to the south. If you follow the clear trail, you will ride eastward from Arenjun for about an hour, and then turn due south and continue thus. The woman of Zamboula is on that course.”

“You — know this?” The Eye was a warm metallic presence against Conan’s chest.

“I know it, Conan my dear servant. It is not for you to know *how* I am certain; I am Hisarr Zul, and I have my ways. Four hours have passed since I came to find you here. Do you merely follow that course. You are rested, and big and strong; you should gain on her by minutes every hour. Go.”

“My sword . . . I have no horse . . .”

“You are a thief, and have stolen coin secreted somewhere. I want nothing of the dead Irani-stani; take his possessions. Obtain a horse. I would suggest, too, a khilat or kafiye. Your sword stands beside the rear door, with your belt. It is without a point, but serviceable. You are no thrust-fighter, with those arms!”

Conan looked down. For the first time he saw that his belt was missing, along with sheathed dagger and sword scabbard. That he had not noticed instantly bespoke the effect on him of the yellow powder and its antidote — and his horror at having lost his soul.

He hoped his pouch was where he had left it. He was not sure how long he'd been within Hisarr's manse; surely five hours, which was over four hours longer than he'd intended. Hisarr's slightly bulging eyes were staring; Hisarr's excellent voice was speaking, telling Conan how to reach the rear door of his mansion home. By that door he would leave . . . not as a guest, not even as a thief, but as a servant.

Conan glanced longingly at the mirror, and considered sudden violence.

“Only I can regain your soul from it, barbarian,” Hisarr said, stepping back. “It will be safe with me for . . . let us say, one month.”

“Zamboula is farther than the journey of a single month!”

“See that you overtake her far sooner, then! Do you want conducting hence? Go, servant.”

Conan's glance followed the direction of Hisarr's gesture. Two more of the uniformed guardians had entered and stood by the door.

Each held a naked sword. Each stared, empty-eyed; lost. A thousand ants seemed to creep up Conan's spine as he looked on those two dully purposeful men, once thieves. Once men.

Soulless, he thought, and hated Hisarr Zul for seeing his shudder.

Conan started for the door, trying to regain the wonted set of his broad shoulders, his lithe, confident swagger. "I will tarry beside the Iranistani," he said, and did so, a few seconds later.

The corpse was hideous and nauseous, a thing that had once been a man, now gone violently dark purple and swollen like a dehiscent seed pod seconds from bursting.

"I'll not strip you, friend," Conan muttered. "You can help me a bit more, though."

He pretended calm while he appropriated the Iranistani's weapon belt. From it were slung a sheath for dagger and sword-long Ilbarisi knife, and a pouch. Conan buckled on the belt, hoping that the pouch was coin-stuffed even while he doubted. Picking up the long blade from the Ilbars Mountain country, he sheathed it at his side.

"Show me the way out of this place."

The two staring, silent guards did. His own weapons and belt were there at the door, with the coil of rope. Conan buckled his broad belt on over that of Ajhindar. One of the soulless men held the door wide for his departure into the night not yet lightened by pre-dawn.

"You have no soul," the Cimmerian said, pausing in the doorway. "Would you go on serving the man who stole it? Would you like the gift of death?"

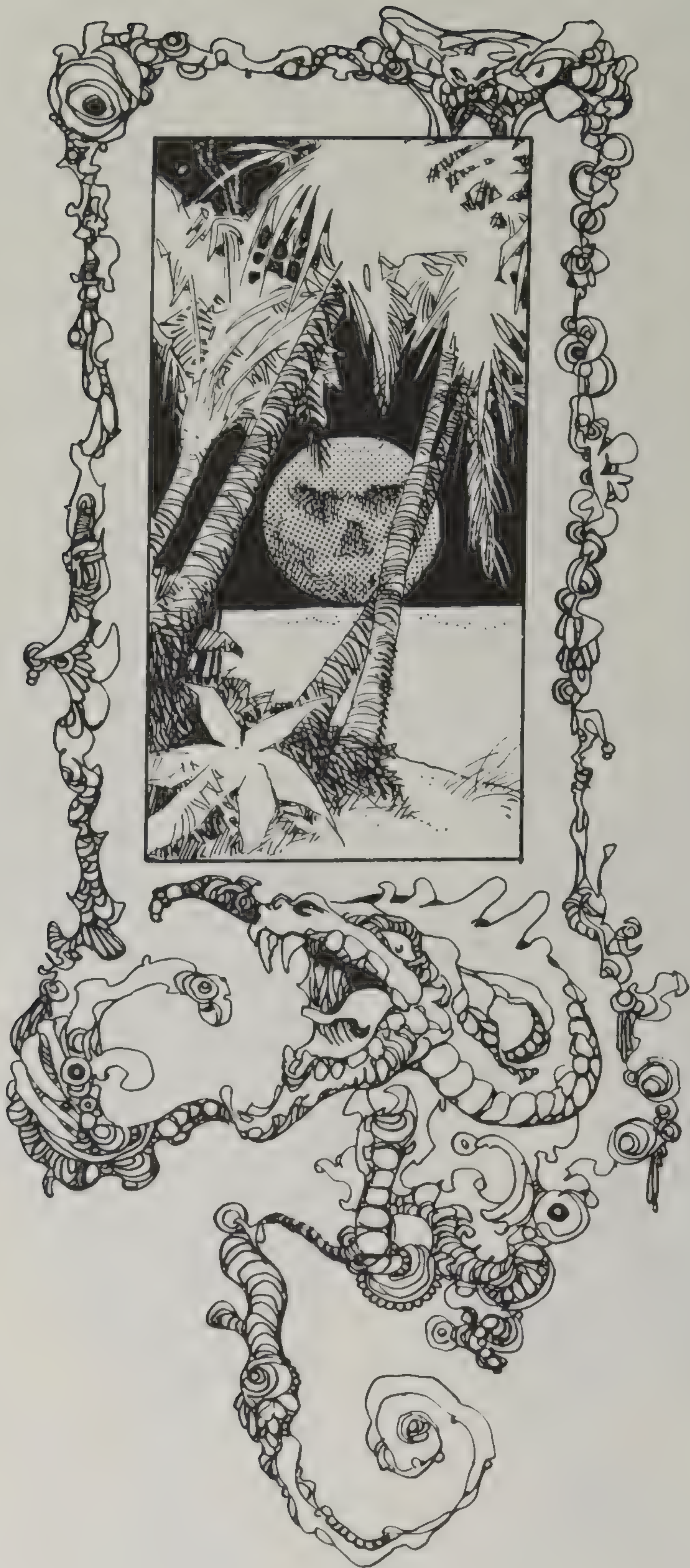
For the first time then, Conan had speech of one of the guardians of Hisarr Zul.

“To live soul-less is to be dead while alive, Cimmerian. To die without a soul is worse.” And the once-man closed the door almost on Conan’s heel.

Conan departed in horripilation. The voice that had pronounced those lost, awful words had been that of Hisarr Zul.







4.

At the Oasis of Death

In an oasis that was indeed a *long* two days' ride from Arenjun, Conan lay on his back and stared unseeingly up at a sky besprent with stars like a million scintillant jewels — or a million staring eyes. Nearby his new horse rested. A few yards away, a horse of one of the other visitors to this oasis snorted.

Soulless, Conan thought, and hated Hisarr Zul for seeing him shudder, for making him helpless.

Yet did it matter? Conan wished that he could be sure. The grim Lord of the Mound who was Cimmeria's chief god was savage and gloomy. He promised no life after this one. At birth, he breathed power into the souls of men; power to strive and slay. "What else," Conan's father had said, "should one ask of the gods?" Well, other men of other lands asked much more, and believed much more. If only Conan could be sure. If this life were all there was, a soul meant nothing.

Yet . . . that feeling of *emptiness* remained in the Cimmerian, and he knew it would until he had regained from Hisarr Zul the contents of that horrid little mirror. Let someone else say that it was mere suggestion, and Hisarr's eyes; Conan knew that he had been plagued by the sensation at once upon awakening, before the mage showed him the mirror and explained its portent.

After two days, Conan still cursed the wizard who had become the most literal master of his soul.

From time to time he also cursed himself. He should have behaved more sensibly in many ways, and the last was that he should have

stripped the corpse of Ajhindar of Iranistan. It was a victorious combatant's due. The man's sleeved shirt and loose trousers would have saved Conan coins — which he could have spent on provisions.

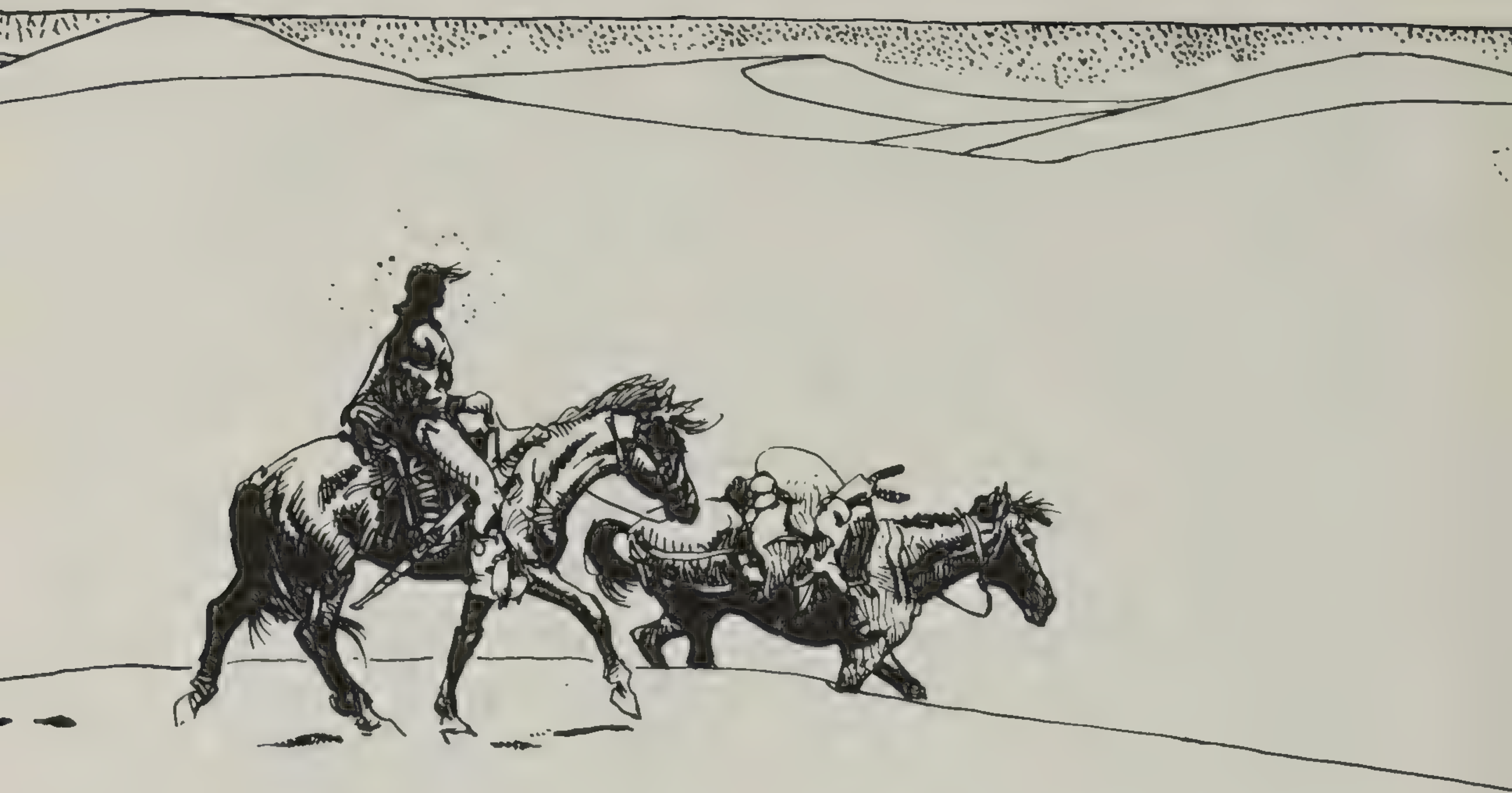
He rode the best horse he could afford, wore the cheapest protective clothing available, and had only his own pointless sword for defense.

His money, as well as the contents of Ajhindar's purse and his excellent Ilbarsi blade, had clothed Conan and bought scanty provisions; Ajhindar's belt and truly excellent dagger had to go to provide more food for a journey that might last days or a fortnight. (That it would last longer was inconceivable; Conan *had* to be back in Arenjun within a month.)

Thus had he left Arenjun, knowing that he was well mounted, indifferently armed, and poorly provisioned for day after sweltering day on the desert beneath a sun become deadly enemy.

During the afternoon of the second day, the horse — which Conan called "Horse" — was complaining and showing impeded strength from lack of water. Confident of reaching the oasis, his new master had brought little. A man could endure much when he must, the Cimmerian knew; so could a horse. And then the oasis was in sight, and Horse smelled its sweet breath of water-scented air, and Conan had merely to sit his back. Horse knew where he was going.

Horse had brought him here to the oasis, and after that Conan had only to hold the beast back from swelling his belly with too much water too soon.



During those two days Conan had had much time to think. Thievery, he mused, was a precarious trade. So were many others, but thievery contained even more risks: law and the authorities, in addition to the angered objects of robbery. Now he knew, having met Isparana and Karamek and Ajhindar, that other thieves, good thieves as he was, had *patrons*. They stole for others, for this reason or that. They were paid — and presumably equipped, and afforded some protection or backing in the event they fell into the hands of the law. Now the Cimmerian knew that even kings hired thieves.

Certainly that was a better way for a man to further his chosen career!

A youthful hillman could dream of crowns and soft women, but it was not likely he'd ever wear the one or night with the other.

Once this revolting rewardless job was done and he had his soul back of that scurvy Hisarr, he'd explore the possibilities of improving himself; try to bring himself to the attention of moneyed employers.

Meanwhile, he and Horse had their bellies full of water, at least, and on the morrow he'd leave here with more. Better to travel in the cool of the night, but Horse badly needed his rest.

Unexorcisable thoughts continued to crowd Conan's mind as he lay restlessly awaiting sleep in the officially nameless oasis some called Breath of Arenjun and others Sight of Kherdpur; the name depended upon the destination of the traveller. Over him lay the old cloak he had stolen three nights previous; nights on the desert

were cool. Nearby Horse stood tethered, asleep.

On the far side of the pool of good water with its ring of hardy grass and shading palms were the men Conan had found here on his arrival. The three had exchanged few words.

Obviously the other two had been lying up, preparatory to travelling by night with their two camels and one handsome jasper-hued horse. No more anxious than they to hold converse, Conan forced his mount to the pool's southern bank before allowing him to drink.

The Cimmerian had slaked his thirst by lying prone beside his noisily sucking horse. Across the pool, one of the other two pilgrims watched, for lack of aught else to do, Conan assumed. He rose, tucked back into his tunic the false Eye of Erlik that had fallen forth, and commenced persuading Horse to leave off trying to suck the pool dry. The other man, dark and Hyrkanianly hawk-nosed under his white kafiye, looked away. He did not even glance over when Conan found it necessary to drag Horse physically back from the water. That the poorly-cloaked youngster was able to do so would doubtless have surprised the other traveller, had he been watching. Certainly his master's strength surprised the horse.

"We'll both fill our bellies again at daybreak, Water-hog," Conan had told the animal, which now bore a name.

Now the horse slept while his penurious master strove to quell the tidal activity of his restless mind. He did wonder, idly, why the other two men had not yet departed.

Had the Cimmerian found sleep at once, he might never have wakened. The unnamed oasis called variously Sight of Kherdpur and Breath of Arenjun was about to become the Oasis of Death.

Though Conan did not know and would not have cared had he known, the two men with whom he shared the benefices of the oasis were from Samara, in the Misty Mountains to the southeast. They were entrepreneurs of a special sort. Presently they were journeying to Shadizar of Zamora to sell a motley assortment of goods, none of which had been gained through trade. Perhaps next time they'd be able to afford four or five camels . . .

One of them, Uskuda, had been to Zamboula more than once, along the caravan route from the Colchians. He had seen the amulet always worn by the satrap who ruled Zamboula for Turan. He assumed it to be valuable; it was a kinglet's. Just at sundown this night, he had seen that amulet again — or so he thought. Surely such a royal prize would nigh double his and his partner's profits, up in Shadizar the Wicked.

The newcomer was manifestly weary. Uskuda waited a long hour, and more.

Now, taking the end to bring him around opposite Conan's sleeping horse, Uskuda the Samaratan crept around the cabochon-shaped pool of water. His dagger was not yet drawn. Crouching, he drew it only when he was no more than two body-lengths from the supine, cloak-covered northerner.

Dagger in hand, Uskuda straightened in a rus-



tle of trousers under desert robes and rushed those few intervening feet to fall dagger-foremost on the other man.

That rustle was not the first knowledge Conan had that the man was creeping upon him. He was unable to imagine himself the object of robbery, but was ever as untrusting and expectant of baseness as he was alert. He had devoted several minutes to letting his right hand creep out to the hilt of his sword, and easing it back under the cloak atop him. His left hand, meanwhile, had eased across his chest to the far rightward top of that faded russet mantle.

Though few indeed were the human ears that could have distinguished the whisper of Uskuda's dagger leaving its sheath, Conan heard. Now he heard the rustle of cloth, and the first two of the other man's rushing footsteps.

Conan's left hand whipped away the cloak while his right brought up the sword. At the same time, his stomach muscles tensed into stony hardness and his upper body came up from the ground.

His extended sword met the attacker between navel and crotch.

The force of his assailant's charge knocked Conan back to the ground. It also sent every wisp of breath gushing from Uskuda's lungs. He was not, however, spitted on a pointless sword. Perhaps he was cut a little, through his bulky clothing, and perhaps not; it did not matter. The attempt at murder — it would have been his eleventh, in point of fact — failed.

The iron muscles of Conan's right arm strained and bulged. He not only kept the other man from falling on him, but indeed hurled him aside, to his right. Only then did the Cimmerian remember that he had sought to transpierce a man with a sword no longer suited for such work.

Within three seconds more Conan was on his feet. His assailant rolled away, gasping. Though fighting noisily for breath and hurting low in his gut, Uskuda also got to his feet. As he came up, so did his sword. He had dropped his dagger.

The Cimmerian drove in and struck hard, full of righteous anger. Uskuda dodged away, the while slashing at Conan's thighs. Both blades

sheared the air only and Conan knew this was an inexperienced blade-fighter. From new directions, the two crouching men again faced each other with bared teeth and slightly moving swords.

Uskuda feinted a short thrust. Conan twisted aside and, turning completely around, directed a whistling slash at the other's neck. Uskuda squatted under that killer sweep and chopped at Conan's legs. Bounding high, Conan alit and rushed on past Uskuda, who turned crouching. He knew now that he faced a deadly foe.

"I give it up," the man from Samara said. "I thought you were someone else!"

And while the Cimmerian paused to consider that offer of peace, Uskuda risked all in a long lunge that should have covered the barbarian's genitals with blood from his riven intestines.

It did not; with a clang that was like the striking of a great gong in the stillness of desert night, he struck the stabbing blade away. So forceful was that stroke that Uskuda's right arm was carried far out to his right, almost horizontal from the shoulder.

Not only had Conan's stroke been slowed by its clangorous impact with the other man's blade, the Cimmerian was both faster and stronger. Thus he recovered first. His back-slash chopped deeply into Uskuda's right thigh, just at the knee. From the would-be assassin's lips burst a ghastly sound, neither a moan nor a cry and yet both.

Even as his leg buckled, Uskuda tried to strike with his sword. The leg collapsed faster than the arm could move.



Conan's arm had barely slowed. His sword blurred, catching the moonlight in a silvery flash. When he yanked the blade free of the other's leg, it trailed blood that rode the air in scarlet streaks and droplets. He added momentum and force by spinning completely around again, and this time chopped nearly through Uskuda's left arm, immediately below the shoulder.

Uskuda fell. He bore two deep, blood-gushing wounds and had but one hand to grab himself with. He clutched at neither wound. Now that he felt death more imminent than the dawn, he thought only of vengeance, if he thought at all. Twisting on the sandy ground, he struck at Conan's shins. The blow was weak; Conan was leaping upward; the sword's edge skinned the sole of his right sandal. Then Conan's foot came down on a wrist. Bones crackled and the sword leaped from nerveless fingers and Conan's sword chopped into Uskuda's chin and neck.

The Cimmerian twisted his unpointed sword to get it free of one who had less than a minute remaining in this world. Turanian Erlik's arms were outstretched for another guest in his domain of death.

For a few instants the Cimmerian stood looking down at his attacker, reflecting on the difference between honest thieves such as he and idiots like this who sought to slay first and seek what might be there in booty after. Then Conan's ears gave him reason to spin around.

"You — you killed Uskuda!"

"True, in a few seconds," Conan said equably. "Your partner tried to stab me as I slept. I was not

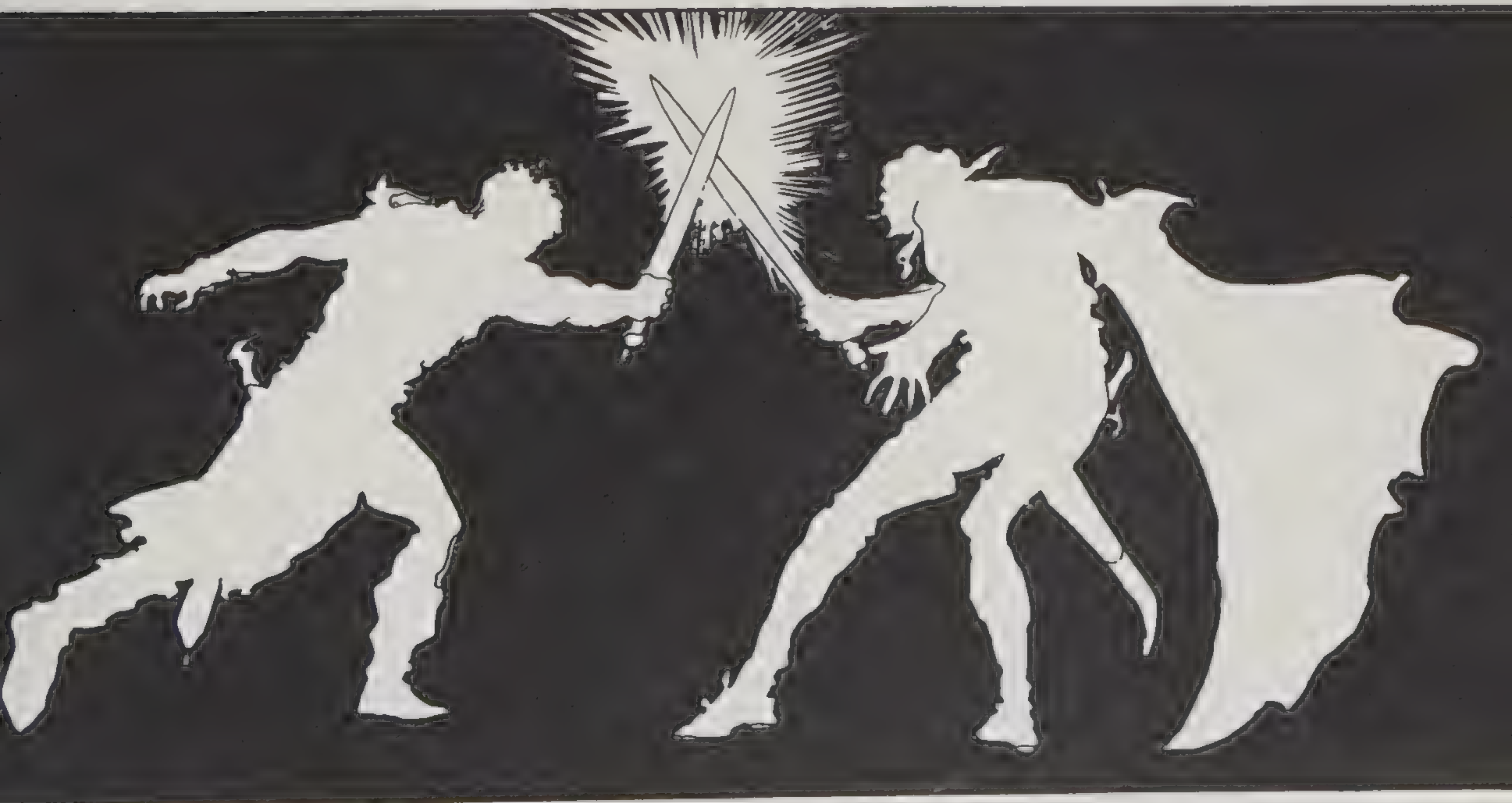
sleeping.”

The second man failed to perceive the illogic of seeking vengeance for a partner who'd got precisely what he deserved. He charged. Conan struck hard at his curved sword and kicked so hard that the man staggered several paces backward and fell into the pool. He dropped his sword to fight the water.

Letting go his own weapon, Conan waded in. First fetching the flailing, spluttering man out so as not to spoil the water, the Cimmerian slit his throat.

The night was again still but for the nervous whickering of horses. Wiser camels remained hunkered down in their kneeling postures of rest, and merely stared with mild interest. They had never stopped chewing.

Conan stood victorious; to him went the spoils.





5.

The Dragon Hills

Before dawn Conan rode south on the well-rested horse of those who had sought to slay him. Behind him plodded Water-hog, at the end of a long tether made of the hair of dead women. His newer beast Conan called Horse.

The Cimmerian now wore a handsome vest of tooled leather, a much better cloak, and a kafiye with a chrysoberyl in its double band of woven black horsehair, and a pair of boots into which, fortunately, their former owner's blood had not spilled. A curved eastern sword hung at his left hip, and two daggers; his own truncated sword was slung in its shagreen scabbard from the pommel of his saddle.

He was well fed and of good cheer.

More food swelled one of the packs borne by the horse behind him; Water-hog had become temporary sumpter-animal, though in a few hours Horse would take his turn. Water-hog also bore three water-sacks and a pack containing some of the wealth-hopes of Uskuda and his late associate.

The camels had proved recalcitrant, and the Cimmerian no drover. After both kicking and cursing them soundly, he left the supercilious beasts — still chewing — and vowed to take possession of them on his way back to Arenjun. Of course that was naïve, but Conan, like all sensible men, hoped and dreamed.

All day he rode hard, due south. At dusk he rested for an hour, and changed horses, replacing saddle with packs.

He rode on into the night, letting Water-hog pace himself as he wished. The northerner hardly

noted his crossing of the Road of Kings, on which some day he'd be a conquering rider. A caravan he met directed him to a well, where he and his horses tarried to drink. First refilling the leather-covered pottery jug by which water was drawn up, Conan rode on for another hour. Only then did he halt his weary beasts.

Reeling with weariness himself, Conan nevertheless remembered to tether both animals. All three slept, disregarding the dawning sun and an inhospitable bed of rock and sand.

A few minutes after he awoke hours later, the Cimmerian was again on his way.

Two horses and full packs and belly cheered him, as did the words of the caravanseer he'd talked with; yes, they had met another lone traveler, headed south. A woman? Well, that pilgrim *had* been a spindly sort though chesty — by all the gods! So that was why! Aye — a woman! And the caravanseer cursed. Clever of a woman, uncleverly traveling alone, to disguise herself with loose clothing and a jallaba with sand-hood!

Now Conan was reasonably sure that he followed Isparana of Zamboula.

The terrain roughened and was all rocky and rolling, and for three hours Conan approached what appeared to be a great gray dragon sprawling across his path. No longer could he push his horses so rapidly. They profited little from that; the going was not easy.

At last he reached the "dragon," a long range of interwoven hills that would have been called mountains by those not of Cimmeria.

Conan sat and stared glumly at the slumbrous

dragon of stone, bare of vegetation save for a scraggly cedar rising out of rock here and there to perch precariously. Now he saw that he must cross a series of east-west hills, sprawling one behind the other in parallel lines. And every hill's crest looked like the back of a rooting hog. He'd be hours and hours getting through and over this multiple barrier.

Nor was that all. At the very top of the farthest humpbacked hill, perhaps a mile and a half distant but many hours' difficult ride, Conan saw another traveler. That rider was just reaching the rocky hill's summit. Mounted on a camel, the other pilgrim led another, which Conan saw was well laden with packs of provisions. The camels' high plump humps bespoke their lack of need for water.

The rider bore no hump. Indeed, even in flowing white desert garb and dun-colored jal-laba, the rider was small, narrow of shoulder.

Conan knew it was a woman. He assumed that it was Isparana.

It was maddening! She was in sight — and perhaps a day away! With his horses again weary and soon to be in pressing need of water, the Cimmerian knew that he was at least a day behind her. He sat and cursed by Crom and by Lir, by Badb and Nemain the Venomous, and by Macha and Mannanan. Far off in the hills of Cimmeria, they paid him no mind.

Then, from behind a huge boulder little smaller than Hisarr Zul's manse, another rider emerged.

This one must have met Isparana along the mass of rocky hillsides; now he was no more than

fifty feet from her pursuer. As he paced his horse forward he raised his hand in a gesture of peaceful greeting. Conan was glad enough to return it. He and his horses were too tired to fight or run, and sweat ran from under his hair.

Besides, behind the first man came another, and another. And still another. And a fifth.

All wore arms, and cloaks of the same color, and spiked helmets with pendent camails; helms and cloaks were alike: uniforms. Their features were Hyrkanian, and Conan knew that he was braced by five tall, dark-faced Turanian soldiers. From Zamboula? He thought fast.

"Hot enough for you?" the first asked, pacing forward.

Conan hated the phrase, which must have been a cliché ere Atlantis sank. Yet the words, like the dark-skinned man's voice and mien, were encouraging; they were friendly.

"Becoming so," Conan said. "You're as strange a caravan as I."

The Hyrkanian grinned. "We're — Tarim's name! Where are you from, with those *blue eyes*?"

"Cimmeria," Conan said easily. The man was a provincial who'd never seen eyes colored other than brown! Encouraged, Conan lied glibly. "More recently I left Shadizar. Surely you haven't come all the way up from Zamboula."

"Cimmeria!" the man was shaking his head. "I've never seen such eyes! No, we're out of Samara, and ours is the worst job loyal soldiers can be handed by a callous commander. We follow two men — we hope. Have you seen — "

“Thieves?”

“How did you know?”

While the other four Turanians reined in before him, Conan gestured. “Several days back, at an oasis —” He broke off then, realizing he’d never see those camels again. Damn! These southern and eastern gods did conspire against a man!

The Turanian leader looked a bit stern. “Yes?”

Conan jerked his head and gave the man a rueful look. “Oh, I’d hoped to go back and get those camels, but they’re lost to me anyhow — there’s a long caravan ahead of you. Yes, I’ve seen them, if you follow thieves. They were at an oasis where I stopped. My horses and I needed both water and sleep. The two there before me had camels. I supposed they were waiting to travel by night. It was dusk. I went to sleep, across the water-hole from them.”

“Hm. And?”

“And one of them tried to kill me while I slept. Fortunately, the fool stumbled. I kicked him into the pool, dragged him out, and saw his companion coming at the run. I cut the first one’s throat.”

“Nice of you not to foul the water.”

“So I thought. His partner was running at me then, with a sword. We fought. I was better than he.”

“They took you by surprise and you killed them both?”

“Only one took me by surprise.” Conan sat up in his saddle, to remind the frowning Hyrkanian of his size. “I’d have brought their camels, but I couldn’t make them follow me. As I am in haste, I

left their packs.” He grinned. “I couldn’t even make one of them get onto his feet!”

All five soldiers laughed, but not in scorn; they knew camels.

“You don’t know camels,” their leader said.

“I don’t. I think I don’t want to.”

“Camels like to think they’re accompanying you, not being driven or led,” a soldier said.

“You seem to have one sword too many,” another observed.

“Only a half,” Conan said and carefully, using his left hand, he drew his own blade from its saddle-slung sheath. “I broke this in the fight. It was a good sword, too.”

“Looks it. Also old; gone brittle, perhaps. And the one you wear belongs — belonged to one of the men we follow.”

Conan nodded. “I hope you aren’t employed by a lord who’d see an honest man disarmed.” *Try and do it*, he thought, while more than hoping they would not.

The leader shrugged. “No no; keep it. I do fear we are employed by a lord so niggardly that we must search the packs on your sumpter-animal, though.”

Conan affected a great sigh. “Ah, and I am passing anxious to catch up to the rider you five just met, too.”

“That woman? I can’t imagine why. Unfriendly bitch!”

“Indeed!” Conan said, nodding and grinning; a man among men, talking about a woman. “She is indeed! Her former lord, back in Shadizar, is not all that unhappy to see her go.

He does want back a few little trifles she took with her, though. You noted a well-laden sumpter camel?"

"Aye. So. She lied to us, and both you and we follow thieves! Well, I regret the necessity of searching your pack, uh — where did you say you come from?"

"Shadizar — oh. Cimmeria."

"Cimmeria. Up north somewhere?"

Conan nodded. "The weather is a bit chill — though I admit I'd welcome it right now. I came down to warmer climes to seek my fortune, and found employment as bodyguard to a moneyed sort in Shadizar. If I don't catch up to Isparana, I may as well keep on going."

"Check the packs," the Turanian leader directed, and two of his men went to do so. He looked Conan appraisingly up and down. "A man who is employed as bodyguard and kills two men who surprised him in sleep would be welcome in Samara — if he chooses to wear one of these." He touched his helmet.

"A northerner with my accent and these eyes, employed in Turan?"

The man gestured. "Of course. We're not bigots. Men who are good with weapons can find employment anywhere. Or death, if they choose not to be on the side of the Empire and its laws. Kambur here is from Iranistan."

"I will remember," Conan said, and twice asked the man's name, and committed it to memory. Arsil, of Samara.

Fifteen minutes later the Cimmerian was advised that this necklace and this chalice and these

matched pearls would have to go with the soldiers. Oh, and this dagger with the jewel-crusted hilt.

"These have been specifically listed as missing, and by a man of wealth and power," he was told. "We have no listing of these other things, and you don't look like a thief. They must be yours." And Arsil of Samara winked.

"In truth," Conan said, "I believe one each of those gold coins belongs to your men. You must have dropped them."

"Hmm. Since they are Samaratan, you must be right. One each, men. It has been our pleasure, Cimmerian."

"I admit it hasn't been mine. My pack is lighter. And I am farther behind Isparana. Is there no way around these hills, or a way through them faster than the route she took; the way you came?"

The Turanian frowned darkly and shook his head. "Conan: there it is. One winds one's way up, starting behind that grandfather of boulders. You don't want to know about it, or take it."

Conan continued staring questioningly at him until Arsil spoke on, with reluctance. He gestured.

"From the top of the first hogback a man can see a gorge; a ravine that slices through the rest of the hills. It was the pass through the Dragon Hills for hundreds of years. It still looks tempting. In the face of crossing so much hard terrain, many have been tempted and have succumbed. The gorge is haunted or peopled by . . . something. Over the course of the past ten years,



when the haunting began, exactly two of those who entered the gorge — seeking a short cut through the hills — have emerged. Both were inexplicably abraded, and both were mad; driven mad by the demon in that gulch! One babbled about a lich, a sand-lich, and now the ravine is called the Gorge of the Sand-lich. The bones of all others who have ridden into that deadly pass lie within . . . though their animals nearly always emerge. Take the fortune doled out by wise gods, Conan of Cimmeria, good and bad; cross the hills despite the time, and avoid that demon-haunted gorge, for it is only a pass and a shortcut to Hell.”

“No one has invaded in force? You know nothing more?”

“Tarim’s beard! Is that not enough?”

“Aye . . . my thanks, Arsil of Samara. I must ride. I’ll be a day crossing those accursed hills!”

“Very nearly,” the Turanian assured him, nodding. “Less than two days’ ride beyond, though, lies a fine sprawling oasis. Rest there, and count your blessings for having met us, and avoided that beckoning passage to Hell! Good fortune, in catching your woman!”

“Not my woman.”

“Make her so then, man — if only temporarily!” And reining about, Arsil joined his men, to lead them northward.

Thus the one and the five parted, with the Turanians riding on to attempt retrieval of the rest of the loot stolen in Samara. Conan had seen no reason to tell them that he’d paced one hundred steps eastward from the oasis of death, and there

buried the very best contents of those recalcitrant camels' packs.

His horses slipped and slid and complained as they made their way up that first rocky hill, and Conan found it expedient to dismount and make his way on foot. Descending the other side was no easier, and by the time he reached the narrow valley that separated the first and second hills he knew what he was going to do.

Mounting, he rode a short distance westward and entered the long, rather broad gorge he had seen from the hillside. Certainly he believed in demons and hauntings; he also believed implicitly in himself. And he was in a hurry.







6.

The Sand-lidh

The deep slice along which Conan rode was nearly straight enough to have been chopped here by a single blow of the sword of a giant, provided the blade had been curved, and a bit wavy. Long ages ago roaring foaming water or resistless ice must have torn out this ravine that forged between hill after hill. No valley this, but a cleft through the land that would accommodate no more than three mounted men riding abreast. Granitic rocks in grays and browns, shot with occasional splotches or veins of red and ochre, rose thrice the height of a mounted man. The forbidding rock faces seemed to glower down on the lone rider with his two horses. Conan kept to his left, availing himself of a bit of shade.

The horses were restless, nervous. The very sand seemed to shimmer and shift, gem-sparkling, under their gingerly pacing hooves. Conan told himself that the intermittent low moaning sounds emanated from a breeze blowing down the gaping cleft between looming cliffs.

There was no wind. There was not so much as a breeze.

The sun was a palpable force, shade or no, and Conan's head seemed to fulminate. At least he saw no corpses, no bones. His mount paced deeper into the gently bending gorge. The very air was menacing, oppressive.

Keeping a tight rein lest the beast try to make good on his threats to bolt, Conan never ceased turning his head. Eyes hard as blue agate burned this way and that, seeking to project a gaze to pierce the very stone that hemmed him.

He saw a place where he might get up out of

the gorge and onto one of the hills. The option was still open to him; already he had cut hours off Isparana's lead.

The sun seemed to resent that, and sought to bake him like rock-bread, in the space enclosed by the glowering cliffs.

The moaning rose in volume and increased its frequency. The tone was higher now, and seemingly human or, worse, preter-human; a doomed creature crying out its complaints of misery. Or . . . threats? And somehow gaining strength, too, as if nurtured by his presence here in its rockbound domain; as if feeding on every step of his incursion.

A lich? A sand-lich? Surely no corpse made such sounds!

He glanced back. His pack-horse pranced and sidled, tossed its head and rolled fearful eyes. They had come far, the Cimmerian saw. The gulch's shallow bend and gentle little curvings had blotted its entry from sight.

Halfway, the Cimmerian thought. *We've come halfway.* No use turning back, now.

The moaning came from behind him. The moaning rose before him, trembled around a shadowed curve in the passage ahead. It emanated from the towering walls of stone on either side and rose up from the sand beneath the hooves of his nervous horse. The sand twinkled and flashed like millions of tiny gems in the sunlight. The sand moaned. The moaning became a steady keening.

Badb and Nemain, but this was maddening!

His mount plodded past white bones, and





Conan compressed his lips in a grim line. They were human bones. So were those — and aye, that was another pallid skeleton, sand-polished and sun-bleached. There lay a sword, not far from the segmented white twigs that had been a man's fingers. That was a dagger over there, and no stain marred its shining blade. He saw the skeleton of but one horse, while counting eleven human ones. The while, the moaning rose until it was a steady ululant assault on his ears, a disturbing tenor.

Twelve skeletons. Thirteen. Two Turanian helmets. More weapons.

His horse tried to shy from a fourteenth sprawl of bones, and Conan clamped both legs while he drew in the reins with his big fist. The moaning was no longer intermittent; it but rose and fell, while sounding steadily. As if it had grown stronger with his advance into the narrow, inescapable domain it haunted — or as if he were breaching its inner lair, challenging it too closely.

"Stop!" he snarled, glaring ferally about. "Stop your noise! Show yourself or be silent!"

His voice echoed at him from the rough stone walls flanking him — along with the moan-sound, now risen to a wail.

Conan blinked then, and jerked his head as if to clear it. He blinked again, disbelieving his eyes. Ahead and on either side of him, the gorge's sandy floor seemed to have come alive. It seemed to be shifting, flowing, the sands skittering brightly as if by little puffs of air. There was no breeze. In his pressing thighs, Conan felt the trembling of his horse.



And the sand moved.

The sand rose up then, swirling in its millions of grains, tiny spots winking and flashing. There was no wind; not even a zephyr stirred the air. The mournful howling came from no wind, and no wind raised the whirling dancing sand.

His mount whimpered, jerking its head, tried to turn and flee. Conan held it with a very tight rein — and the beast reared. Surrounded by rising spinning sand in refulgent motes, the animal pranced on its hind legs. It dropped again to all fours, bucked, and reared again. Conan clung, compressing his mouth and slitting his eyes against air clogged with ever-moving crystals.

When the horse rose up on its hind hooves for the fourth time, it also twisted.

Conan knew seconds of disequilibrium, saw the sky seem to dance and tilt. Then sand was above and sky below. Sand stung his hands. The reins tore free, cutting his fingers. Conan hit the ground hard.

Blinded by animated sand and by shock of impact, he heard loud whinnies — and galloping hooves. That sound retreated. His horses were fleeing, back the way they'd come. He had lost both horses, along with their packs.

He rose cursing and squinting against a blinding stinging sandstorm driven by no wind. The curses ceased quickly; he spat grit and clamped teeth and lips. He was a prisoner in a wailing, spinning cloud of never-still sand that rose up and up, billowing.

Sand-demons, desert-men called such when they saw them out on the deserts, spinning be-

cause of vagrant gusts of wind. It was only a figure of speech. Not, Conan thought, this time!

And then, immediately before him, the grains began to cluster, to billow up into a pillar. It spun, swirled, moaned, and that keening wail now hurt his ears. While his nape and armpits prickled and he sweated more than he had during a hotter period of that day, the sand coalesced, thickened. Every grain seemed trying to join every other, in that whirling column.

The column began to take on an anthropomorphic shape, even as it darkened.

It did. The sand had formed itself as a man, a dead-faced lich with a sinister dark gape of a mouth, dangling long arms — and no eyes. Though Conan's eyes were slitted almost shut and he could hardly see, he whipped out the curved eastern sword he had of a dead man of Samara.

The sand-lich did not pounce. It swirled, a chaotically spinning grayness in which that gaping mouth remained turned ever toward him, open and black within. The Cimmerian cut at it without effect. The sand seemed undisturbed by the sword's vicious slash through. There was nothing here to cut, nothing to hurt or kill; it was only a tall pile of sand!

It came over him then. It enveloped him.

Conan could not fight it, could not gain free, for it moved with him as though he were part of it. Sand stung his face, blotted his hearing and vision, pressed at his lips, and he knew he durst not breathe else he fill his nose and throat and lungs with airless grains of death. And the sand

shut out all air, and Conan began to strangle, to smother.

He knew he could not hold his breath forever. He must expel it — or try to. And then would come the time when he must succumb to the automatic demands of his body. He would breathe in — and die.

He could not escape, could not twist or hurl himself free. The sand was a stinging, cloaking shroud that enveloped him, and it would be his death-shroud. His ears were full of a moaning wailing, but now the roaring from within began to blot and overwhelm it . . .

Words came then, and the Cimmerian knew that they were not spoken, but that he heard them within his head, in his mind.

You have no soul!

I am dying . . . air . . .

You have no soul! No soul! Are you the thrice-accursed Hisarr Zul?

No! Dying . . . air . . . His-s-sarr . . . No! No, no!

Where is your soul?

Dying . . . can't breathe . . . Hisarr Zul has it . . .
Desperately, aware that he had lost his battle, Conan expelled his breath between lips only slit-
ted apart.

You are not Hisarr?

NO!

He has your soul! You have evil of Hisarr Zul?

Yes! Yes! Dying . . . must have air . . . Hisarr stole my soul — you steal my life!

The swirling pillar-shape, almost man-shape of sand spun away, retreating, freeing him. It withdrew some two feet. Conan fell weakly to his



knees, and his gasps were vocal. His eyes bulged and his tongue was out — but now he could breathe. He could not talk for many seconds. He merely breathed, and the air was sweeter than new spring wine.

You live! Explain! The sand-lich stormed in his brain, and it was both command and yearning wheedling.

I am of . . . nowhere hereabouts. I am of Cimmeria, far and far.

You are not the accursed monster Hisarr Zul?

“No!” Conan bellowed aloud. “It’s he has my soul, my very soul!”

And though it was surely insanity to talk to sand, no matter that it resembled now a tall gray corpse all amove as with restlessly feeding maggots, the barbarian did so speak, and he went crafty. He was that anomaly, a man whose pride and code demanded truthfulness and would not brook an unkept vow — and one to whom lying on his behalf came easily. This . . . thing sought Hisarr Zul . . . and it hated him . . .

“I am sent by a well-born employer for the mage Hisarr Zul, for even now he rides hell-bent for Zamboula, having stolen our souls and an amulet of powerful sorcery. Only I could have stopped him . . .”

The apparition moaned, seemed to diminish. It kept its distance and in a voice that issued scratchily, hollowly from that gaping black mouth in its sand-formed “body,” it . . . explained.

“Accursed Hisarr! He rides hell-bent, does he? Would that he were bound there in fact, him and his black heart and his blacker, treacherous soul!

Listen, man of Cimmeria. Hear me, whom you see as monster! I am the shade of Hisarr's brother, I who was Tosya Zul! It was he who slew me and thereby doomed me to this partial existence, restricted to this place of my death! Give ear, man of Cimmeria, to a tale of treachery and the story of how I was *murdered!*"

If such a creature as this could be said to be sane or no, Conan felt that the sand-lich was mad, and with cause. The Cimmerian knew that he would listen, for he was in its power. Perhaps it would tell him how it might be laid, or how Hisarr Zul might swiftly be slain. He composed himself to listen to a story he realized the sand-lich was compelled to tell.

"None other has heard this story, Cimmerian. Attend. Together, my brother and I studied the ancient knowledge," that scratchy, hollow voice said, "and the arcane learning of long-dead mages. We learned those secrets known not in the abodes of men; the demonic lore of those formless horrors that dwell lurking in the farthest hills of the earth, in the very blackness between the worlds, in the ever-shifting sunbaked deserts, and in dark caverns where men go not. Incarnate and exotic magical intelligence became ours, and in our weening pride we sought power. What else is there? Already we had made ourselves wealthy. So we plotted for power, and we were found out — because my brother, as I later learned, could not keep shut his mouth! The khan of Zamboula learned of our plot against him, for his power to make Zamboula our base, and men came for us. Oh, they were right enough!

Nefarious were our intents, and we were indeed brewing abominations in our close-shut house in Zamboula. They came to take us. We'd have been broken on the wheel, my brother and I; our nails would have been pulled out with pincers, and our eyes and tongues. I was out of the house when they came marching along the street with their weapons and their protecting little wizard — a minor bit of pulp who could weave only spells of protection and of seduction. I could have fled then! Instead, I risked my life to run along the streets as fast as I could, and in at the door and thus to our privy chambers to warn my brother Hisarr. Ah, would that I had fled without him, with nothing but the clothes I wore!

“We worked furiously to fill traveling sacks with the most precious of our gems and pearls, for so had we invested, rather than in land or the mere amassing of coins. We were trying to pack our paraphernalia and the books of our lore, the accretions of fifteen years of study and applied genius, *centuries of knowledge*, when the khan's men commenced hammering at the door. They bore torches. We could but flee, with the clothing we wore and our wealth. Yet we cursed and cast vile maledictions on the khan and his men, be sure; for the treasures we left behind were priceless, knowledge and objects and preparations beyond the wealth of men — and all we had was such. Trinkets, for buying. Normal men! We were hardly such, my brother and I! Indeed, we had been close onto learning how to remove the very souls from the bodies of men. He has that knowledge now, has he?”

“Aye,” Conan confirmed, through set teeth.

“Then he is close onto incredible power. With such knowledge, such an ability, all else becomes petty and inconsequential save the accumulation of power through . . . aye, now I say the word, after ten years of death: the accumulation of power through blackmail. Imagine what a man would pay to regain his very soul! Imagine what he would do, were it in the hands of another!”

I need not imagine, the Cimmerian thought bitterly. I know. Get on with it, you who were no less living monster than Hisarr Zul!

“Power over men of the city Watch, first, and then their commanders; over the counsellors and doxies of rulers — and ultimately over rulers themselves! For surely there was a way, my brother, my brilliant brother Hisarr said with those bulgy eyes gleaming like Black Stars, to gain the souls of men from some very personal possession of theirs. So we meant to do. We could have power over all Zamboula, and then over all Turan, over . . .

“But like dogs we fled into the night. Fugitives. We were fortunate to come upon a caravan, late the next day. They knew us not, and we joined them by giving the caravan-master no more than six of ten Iranistani lapis lazuli we had — he thought it was all our wealth! We could have bought his entire caravan, the fat fool! Hisarr and I traveled north with them, lamenting our loss, vowing to begin anew, vowing vengeance on Zamboula’s khan . . . for, I see now, merely defending and protecting himself against us! I showed my brother those few preparations and

writings I had brought out with me — a page from the very Book of Skelos itself! And he lamented, saying that he'd brought forth nothing in our haste to fly. And northward we rode, with my brother and me at the caravan's rear like common hangers-on.

“On the night we came to the hills called Dragon, I discovered that Hisarr had indeed brought certain writings — and had lied to me! He had kept them from me deliberately; I his brother, who had been his mentor and then partner for so many years — I who had *permitted* that viper to join me as partner. For Hisarr is my *younger* brother, and it was I who was the genius, the founder and instigator of our . . . ventures. Without me he'd have been nothing, nothing! Nor had I, in my weening interest in my studies and our future activities, any thought of the truth of our relationship . . . He hated me! He resented me my years, my seniority and superior knowledge! The thrice-accursed *viper*! And so that night I discovered and accused him, and we argued and all of it came out; his resentment and aye, his hatred of me! We parted on that shocking note, both in anger, and on retiring I took certain precautions, ate of certain leaves and said certain words, for I was nervous and suspicious and sought to prevent my being murdered.

“I both failed and succeeded, as you see. That very night — or rather morning, for it was just at dawn — my clever brother did death on me, and afterward burned out my dead eyes with white-hot coins. I was left there — here! The caravan wended on. I was dead . . . but I never so much

as lost consciousness! Ah, my spell and my herbs had succeeded, for I was both dead and alive. Ah, the agony! A million times in these intervening years — how many years have passed, man of Cimmeria?”

“Ten.”

“Ten! And a millions times during those *ten* years of long long days have I wished that I had taken no such precautions, that I had died as other men do, body and mind and soul. No. My body died. It is dead. It began to decompose, and I *knew*, I knew my body was rotting! I knew it when jackals came out of these hills and dug up my decomposing flesh, and feasted on it — on *me*! They ate me, barbarian, *me*! Some of my bones they took away with them, to gnaw in their dark abodes.

“But I remained alive. My soul is bound to this place. My mind, my *ka* is bound here, to bemoan my fate and think of peace, and revenge. And when men came, I attacked, for one of them might be my thrice-accursed brother, Hisarr the viper, the fiend! My will was strong, barbarian. It has gained strength with the passing years. I have gained control over the sand here. I have made it a part of me, subject to my will, so that with it I can form this semblance of a body you see; a body formed of sand! And so I have existed, dead but alive, and yet discorporeal. Nor can I leave this area of this accursed gorge where I was slain and buried, for here is my blood and here lie *most* of my bones. Again and again I have slain, seeking Hisarr — you do understand, northman, that I am surely no longer sane. How could I

be?"

"I understand."

Conan thought on the tale he'd had of the being from another world Yara the priest had kept in his fell tower in Arenjun. This sorcerous plotter was hardly so worthy a prisoner, hardly so pathetic and deserving of aid. Yet still . . .

"Upon the death of my brother, northman, barbarian, Cimmerian — is that it?"

Conan nodded, but the sand-lich had no eyes. "Yes. Cimmerian. I am —"

"Upon his death," the mad ghost broke in, raving, "I too shall find rest. I welcome it now. No longer do I lust for life! This existence is horror! I have served my time in Hell, Cimmerian, and all the while I have been here on the mortal plane! And now . . . now, discovering that you have no soul — for I, a discorporate soul, know — I find the means for my deliverance. Hear me! Hear me, Cimmerian, for you too have cause to hate my brother and wish his death."

Conan's face was like the stone statue of a grimly stern god, then, and his voice emerged as menacing. He spoke without disturbing the set muscles of his face: "Yes."

"Then hear me! You must capture him, make him helpless! He can be slain, Cimmerian, though not as other men may be done to death. The waters of the Zarkheba River will slay him, for that river of far southwestern Kush flows with venom. Or any of his own . . . methods may be turned back on him, which is why he wears no weapons — is this true?"

"It is true." *But where will I come by waters of*

some impossibly distant river, and how may such as I know how to turn back his own sorcerous weapons on him?

“And he has learned to effect the stealing of souls.”

“Aye. His keep in Arenjun is guarded by men whose souls he took and imprisoned in mirrors . . . which he then shattered. But —”

“Ah. You can give them rest by stuffing the skull of Hisarr with earth, and his ears and nostrils, and then severing that head and seeing that it is burned — utterly consumed by flame.”

“His skull. But he lives . . .” And Conan thought: *You are mad indeed, lich of Tosya Zul!*

“He may be slain also by iron forged in Stygia over a fire of bones, for from that dark and demonic land came most of our spells. And he may be slain, too, by strangulation with the hair of a virgin slain with bronze, and made woman after the hair is removed.”

Conan said nothing. He felt his stomach lurch. What an abomination this creature without pity so calmly pronounced! Even for his soul, the Cimmerian knew that he could not murder a young girl and — do what else this mad monster specified. No, if necessary he’d spend years traveling to and through Stygia, to gain a sword of iron. Unless he found some way of turning Hisarr Zul’s own evil back on the mage. That alone was promising; that alone seemed possible; yet it gave Conan little hope.

“And my own soul?”

“It is not important to me! I must have rest! Hisarr must die!”

"I vow on my mother by the gods my people swore by that I shall do all I can to slay him, Tosya Zul, and give you peace. But I want peace while I live. I want my body and my soul united!"

The sand-lich reared, shuddered, grew. "I can kill you, little man!"

"I have no doubt of it, great wizard, as I stand here with no means of slaying you. But I am your best means of gaining peace. Aid me in overtaking him, and I will keep my vow. When you have told me how to regain my soul."

"From him! He can return it to you in moments! Or by wrapping the mirror that imprisons it in the same tresses I have stated will kill him, and burying it thus wrapped in earth on which your blood falls. And by the simple means of causing a crowned person to break the mirror. For there is power in all those who rule, power that few of them know."

"Then I must regain it from Hisarr himself, for I see no likelihood of holding converse with rulers of nations, and asking favors of them!"

"It is of no concern to me, man of . . . who are you?"

"I am Conan, a Cimmerian."

"Why have you not told me? Never mind. Go now, and slay Hisarr Zul, accursed of all gods!"

"You have frightened off both my horses and with them all my water and food. Hisarr is already over these hills — for none uses this pass, now — and out on the desert to the south. I can never overtake him afoot."

"There is an oasis but a day or two south of here, is there not? I remember dimly . . . ah, ye



gods, what anguish is mine!”

“Yes!” Conan said hurriedly.

“Then it is he who shall overtake you, Coner of Simmon! For ten long years have I languished here dead but not dead, seizing on all who came in hopes that each is Hisarr at last! Now — now, Conum of Simmern, you can avenge yourself and *give me rest!* Take a good grip on your sword. Take several breaths and a good deep one *and hold it!* And close your eyes!”

The sand-lich of the haunted gorge was a raving madman, a pitiful *thing* — and yet Conan knew he was both a murderous monster — and a mage. He sheathed his sword and clamped his hand on its grip. He breathed hard, in and out, expanding his lungs, and sucked in a great breath. Holding it, he closed his eyes.

All around him then rose a sandstorm, and it rose, until it was a howling blinding fearsome horror that bore him up as though he were weightless, so that he clung to sword and breath and sanity and knew that he was being borne through the air at a hurtling speed. And he was. He was riding a sandstorm created by the master of the sand, and who was dead.

His belly floated within him and he fought back bile that would make him gasp for breath when there was only clogging, stinging, enfolding sand all about him, encompassing him and bearing him, like some grainy sorcerous cloak that formed wings for his transport.

The wind died then, or whatever force the sorcerous lich used to propel his sand, and gritty grains ceased to sting the Cimmerian’s abraded

hands and face, and he was dumped to the ground. And he smelled water.

As though from the dimmest reaches of the cold dark separating the world of life from that of death, Conan felt the words in his brain: *So you reach the oasis ahead of him, and lie in wait! And so I am exhausted, and*

The mind-voice of Tosya Zul faded from his brain, and the sandstorm was gone, and Conan lay in grass with the scent of fresh water in his nostrils.





7.

Isparaḥa of Zamboula

For a long while Conan lay gasping and wondering. At last he lifted his head, and saw shade, and grass. Slender palms stood sentinel over a sizable oasis that seemed to grow out of a large rock outcropping on an otherwise featureless terrain. Conan lay near the reed-edged water hole, which was a fair-sized pond.

Did I dream?

No; he had ridden into the Gorge of the Sand-lich; his horses were gone; he was well south, and in a large oasis. That one the Samaratan had said lay less than two days' ride from the Dragon Hills? He did not know. He could not be sure. He hoped so, and so he believed. Tosya Zul had presumably referred to the same oasis as had Arsil of Samara.

The Cimmerian grinned. Then surely, he thought, after all his troubles he was indeed ahead of the fleeing Isparana.

He drank, and gazed out on the sun-baked desert, and he thought on Hisarr Zul and on his brother. How sweet it would be to accommodate the latter! To exact his own vengeance, and Tosya's, and at the same time heroically lay the lich of the haunted gulch that so slowed travel! But . . . how? Conan turned over in his mind those means Tosya had detailed for ending Hisarr's life, and for the regaining of the Cimmerian's soul. He liked none of them. None sounded possible. How, then? Hisarr was a dangerous mage. He had but to break the mirror. And into that damned little tube of his, he need puff a single breath to accomplish Conan's doom.

Conan sat beneath a palm, his back against its

slim, sturdy trunk, and stared at nothing. He waited, and he thought.

An old man came to the oasis that afternoon, with his daughter and son and three camels. The son watched the Cimmerian with the dark, suspicious gaze of one ready to fight if necessary though too young to know that he durst not essay against such a man. The daughter looked upon him with fear, and something else that would not allow her to meet his gaze but, when it was directed elsewhere, would not let her look away from him. The father spoke quietly to the quiet, very big young man with blue eyes and a shock of raven hair, who had keenly watched his method of handling the camels.

Yes, the Dragon Hills and the Gorge of the Sand-lich were just under two days north of here. No, they had seen no one. Aye, they were bound for Zamboula; would he care to ride with them?

No, but Conan accepted the food that to him was a huge gift, from these poor folk with so far to go. And while the old man saw to his camels Conan pressed on the skittish boy the sheathed dagger he had of a dead thief of Samara.

"I would not insult you by offering aught for the food you gave in friendship," Conan told the father, "but in friendship I have given your son a small gift of good metal."

"It is well," the old man said, "and may Mitra hurry the steps of him you await, friend. Oh — beware. Some caravans leave ever at the same times, and last night's moon indicated to me that a caravan from Khawarizm should have been

here yesterday. We have not seen it. Perhaps it will arrive this night, or on the morrow."

When Conan continued to gaze at him, the old man said, "Khawarizm is the southernmost port of Turan, on the Vilayet Sea. Slaves are traded for in Khawarizm, and carried northeastward to such places as Khauran and Zamora."

"How does this concern me?"

"Sometimes slavers are not altogether careful as to where they acquire their goods, or how, my young friend from Cimmeria. Where is your protection?"

Conan touched the pommel of his sword.

"Nevertheless," the old man said, "beware."

And he and the boy and girl mounted two of their camels, and the other followed as they rode away southward. Both younger pilgrims looked back. Conan made no sign.

He sat, and for a time he thought about how kind and good it was possible for people to be, and how few behaved so. Then he relaxed, and with the deadly insouciant patience of a stalking panther — or a northern barbarian — he gazed northward. Conan waited for Isparana, and plotted against Hisarr Zul.

While the sun wallowed low amid the deep gold of its setting, Conan watched the slow approach of a single rider and two animals, a mile and more away. While the sun went orange and then red that shot a spray of yellow gold up into the darkening sky, he saw that the rider was sagging, lurching, nigh asleep in the high-cantled saddle of a plodding camel. Another camel fol-



lowed. The rider wore a dun-colored jallaba over white robes, and was slim and narrow of shoulder.

Smiling, Conan belly-crawled through excellent grass, only muttering a curse when he put his hand down in camel dung. He reached his goal: the cluster of large russet-shot gray boulders just at the edge of the oasis; from them swelled the spring that created it. The sound of camel-bells grew steadily in volume.



From there he watched while, just at dusk, Isparana reached the oasis . . . and fell off her dromedary.

She had pushed herself far too hard, Conan thought. Good! Perhaps she'd glanced back to see him when he saw her, from the far side of Dragon hills. Good! She was certain he was behind her, then, and she was weary unto collapse. Her mount plodded on, carefully avoiding her with its big padded feet. It took a sip or two of water, seemed to consider, and began to crop grass. Its companion followed its lead. Conan watched.

For a long while Isparana lay, a bundle of white and neutral tan-gray.

Then she rose onto her elbows, and wormed to the pool as if rising were far too much effort for her drained organism. Slipping back her sand-hood so that glossy black hair fell about her face, she let her head plop into the water.

Conan watched. He noted that she wore a long sword.

He watched while she at last rose wearily, and doffed the jallaba as if every movement was a great effort. Moving listlessly as one who had foregone sleep to gain her supposed lead, she hobbled her camels. Conan watched. Strands of hair like blackest night were water-plastered to her cheek and forehead, not unattractively.

Muffled in the loose white burnoos and yet distinctly feminine, she dragged her feet as she paced to the southern edge of the oasis. He saw her yawn. Once she stumbled and fell headlong, and with an ugly grin Conan heard her curse, by

Erlik and by Yog. At the edge of the greenery, she stood and stared southward. It was obvious to Conan that she was striving to pierce the thickening dark with her gaze. The rising moon lit her face with soft white, and Conan saw that her features were soft-planed; a pretty face.

Conan watched. Never had he seen anyone so weary, so in need of sleep. He would wait. Surely good fortune was again with him.

Kneeling, the camels belched and chewed. Now and again one of the ugly creatures would stretch a leathery neck to tear off a few tendrils of grass to sweeten its cud.

Isparana was unable to see aught but the darkness, nor did the night bring any sound to her ears or the keener ones of the Cimmerian. She returned, like a shuffling ghost in her fluttering white garments, to the water-hole. Conan stared, just able to discern her in the moonlight softened and diluted by tall palm-trees. Then he saw what she was doing, and his stomach and throat tightened.

Unable to look away — he tried — he watched Isparana strip, a woman very alone in the nighted oasis. The languour of exhaustion added sensuousness to her movements and sight of her moonlit form made the Cimmerian covet more than the Eye of Erlik. The soft boots of red felt, yellow trousers and flowing white robes had concealed a most attractive female body, and Conan clenched his teeth.

Temptation rose in the youthful Cimmerian like a mountain freshet and he was unable not to consider wresting from this woman more than



the amulet he must have.

Aye — the amulet. As she turned and slipped into the pool, he saw what she wore around her neck, on a rude leather thong that had been slung under her voluminous clothing. A bauble dangled, winking, between the moving hills of her bare bosom, and two yellow stones gleamed from the pendant's abbreviated arms . . .

The camels, kneeling after the manner of their kind, chewed more and more listlessly, and slept. Soon one was snoring.

Isparana splashed about in the pool, no less listlessly. Conan swallowed again and again. His concealed proximity to so lovely a nude woman was torment for one of his years. He waited without patience, and sought glimpses that but added to his torture.

Nevertheless he entertained the thought that perhaps she was so weary she'd drown and save him a lot of trouble . . .

At last, a pale vision of loveliness in the moon's silver glow, she emerged from the water. Conan saw that even thus bathed and refreshed, she still dragged wearily. She shook out her long hair, black as the sky itself. Her standing with her weight on one foot unconsciously flouted her haunch in a way that made him close his eyes against the sight. She took her hair in her hands and wrung it. Water fell noisily at her feet and glistened on the grass like moonstones.

Conan ground his teeth and shifted restlessly. He had to work consciously to be mindful of making noise. That she was eight or ten years older than he was of no consequence. He was



male, and young, and she was very very female.

With otiose movements she squeezed the moon-flashing midnight of her tresses in the hem of her burnoos. The robe she tedded on the ground. Slipping into her jallaba then, she left it open and lay wearily down. Conan continued to hold his rockbound position, and continued to watch.

Now there was nothing to watch. She must have fallen asleep instantly, not refreshed but relaxed by her bathing.

Both camels snored.

Conan kept his vigil. He was aroused, tempted. He was aware of the beat of his pulse before his ears, a strong hot surge. He waited. The moon lofted higher, a silvery three-quarter like a cradle suspended in the sky. Somewhere, Picts worshiped beneath it, as had women for long and long, for they knew their kinship with the sky-hung Lady of the Night and were monthly reminded of it.

Conan waited, closing his eyes to rest them from their staring into the dark. The camels slept noisily. Conan was sure the woman slept. He waited.

Then a thief of Arenjun rose silently and crept upon the camels, who took but little note while, with great care for silence, he daggered away the bells of their harness. Squatting, he opened a large pack of provisions and transferred some of its contents. And a thief of Arenjun crept then upon Isparana of Zamboula; a thief who had plucked up costly earrings from a little table beside the bed on which their owner slept; who had

robbed another woman while she lay with her lover less than ten paces distant; who had plucked a cloak off a sleeping man without so much as disturbing his snoring.

Only a skittish animal would have heard the whisper of the grass through which the thief of Arenjun made his way, without ever taking his eyes off the sleeping woman he approached.

He looked down at her. She lay on her back, the jallaba open to the ribcage and molded to her womanly form. Conan's tongue touched his lips



as, noiselessly, he slipped his dagger from its hide-covered sheath of oiled wood. Very slowly, mindful of any sound and without taking his gaze off her sweetly reposed face, he let himself slip down to his knees beside the sleeping woman.

The long dagger caught the moonlight in a metallic glint as the big hand that held it approached her throat. There pulsed her jugular, slowly, with her heart at rest.

And there lay a slim length of brown leather. Knotted behind her neck, it vanished into the bosom of the v-necked, pullover robe whose hood cradled her hair.

Conan used both hands.

She stirred while he sliced through the thong about her neck, and he went rock-still for long, long moments. She sighed; she did not waken. The camels' snoring did not interfere with her sleep, and neither did the feather-light touch of an experienced thief. After a time he took away the thong and, ever so slowly and with frequent pauses, the pendant it held.

Without moving from her side he cut away the knot, which he stowed in his mouth and tasted its salt. On the thong he strung the pendant he had already removed from about his own neck. It was identical . . . save that this substitution was without true value to her lord, the Turanian Empire's satrap in Zamboula.

Isparana stirred when he slipped the thong about her neck, and knotted it. He but tucked the pendant into the top of her garment; he would not torture himself and risk waking her by trying to tuck it deeper, into the warmth of her bosom.

His face tensed and he stared down at her while his eyes burned like blue lava. For a moment he was tempted to draw the leathern cord as tightly as he could and hold it until she thrashed and lapsed into a new sleep from which she'd never awaken.

He did not. He succumbed neither to the urge to enjoy nor to slay her. Barbarian he might be, and was called, often with scorn; he was nevertheless neither a rapist nor a murderer. Murder was sensible, under the circumstances; the Cimmerian, who was more animal than most men, was this time more human than sensible.

With a flex of his knees he pushed himself fluidly to his feet. Isparana slept the deep sleep of complete exhaustion, while a superb thief worked on. He turned and left as silently as he had ghosted to her side, and now Conan wore around his neck not Hisarr's copy but the real Eye of Erlik.

It felt no different.

For some reason known only to cameldom, Isparana's animals awoke without raising a clamor of ugly voices. Both even deigned to rise in response to his silent urging in which he copied the old man who'd tarried here earlier this day. The bells from their harness lay in the grass, well to one side. He had separated the contents of the main provisions-pack; he would not take all her food.

Conan sought to lead the humpbacked animals, the strange ships of the desert. They stood fast. He circled and sought to drive them before him, even slapping the flank of one with the flat

of his new, curved sword. Its flying foot only just missed him.

Conan made his kick count, and the dromedary grunted and staggered on that leg. It turned to stare from beneath the long lashes given it by the gods to protect its eyes from the flaming desert sun. Conan returned the stare, not sullenly or icily but with the great malice he sought to convey to the beast so pridefully unlike a horse.

"I am going to lead you out of here," he murmured to the camel Isparana had used as sumpter-beast, "or drag your strangled carcass. Choose, old supercilious-head."

The other dromedary, him Isparana had ridden, turned to stare. The Cimmerian gave it an evil look and showed the beast his teeth. The camel regarded him ruminatively. Conan moved back to its head and reached for its halter. The beast sought to bite and big, yellowed teeth grazed his wrist. Conan slapped its nose, hard. The animal made a throaty noise.

"Come."

The Cimmerian took hold of its halter, rather than the rein. Beside its *jeml* head, the man paced forward. The camel plodded beside him! The other followed!

Don't know camels, eh? Conan mused in high triumph. They understand mastery like any other, man or beast. They just have to have it proven to them differently, and they've more pride than horses — or less sense. Very well then, camels: I've more pride, and you feel it, don't you!

The verdant grass of the oasis ended as he and



the animals walked on, with Conan's face to the north. *Farewell, Isparana*, he thought. *I probably hope the slaver caravan comes — but for your sake I hope they have all the human goods they want!*

Conan had evidence that he possessed some sort of sixth sense, which had saved his life more than once. Whether he did or no was not at point; whether Isparana did was also unimportant; for whatever reason, at that moment the woman awoke. She sat straight up as if she'd slept for hours.

“Thief! STOP, *thief!*”

And she came racing around the water-hole, naked sword in hand.

Conan tried to spring onto her riding-camel, failed, tried to get it to kneel. Failing, he knew he was out of time. He turned grimly to face Isparana. He heaved a great sigh.

Around the pool she charged. One hand waved her sword so that it flashed in the moonlight; the other held her jallaba's skirt well up. Bare legs and feet flashed and she was muttering and cursing all the while.

“Wait!” Conan called. “Stop!”

“Stop!” she cried, and her voice rose into a screech. “While you steal my camels and leave me here to DIE?”

He was forced to let go the camel's halter and draw his sword. She came on, running with the new energy of adrenaline, both angry and as if mad. On the run, she swung a sweeping slashing stroke. He easily used his sword to deflect it, at the same time swiftly sidestepping. The charging



woman's momentum carried her on and she slammed into the riding camel. As she rebounded to fall asprawl on her backside, the beast decided it had enough of yells and now this untoward impact. It emitted a grunting, bubbling roar and bucked, kicking in a most un-camelish display. One splayed soft foot caught the other camel in the foreleg. Both beasts complained. Then the second dromedary reacted to the shouts of Isparana's high-voiced screams and this sudden explosion of its companion into vicious action.

The pack-camel fled.

"No!" Conan bawled. "Stop!"

The riding-camel then proved it was not wedded to the role of leader; it followed the sumpter beast. Never mind that camels were the most stupid and unarousably placid of animals; they were aroused. They made off into the night.

Yelling, Conan leaped after them. The rearward camel was frightened anew and speeded its gait. Conan lunged and missed; he fell sprawling in the harder-packed sand at the oasis's edge. The dromedaries lurched away into the darkness; ungainly or no, they showed speed.

As he started to push himself to his feet Conan heard Isparana's enraged cry — coming at him. He rolled as swiftly as he could impart the sideward motion. Her sword, already descending in a cleaving stroke, dug into the sand where he'd lain. Conan, on his back, hoisted himself on his elbows.

"Damn you, woman!" he snarled, and his sideward-rushing feet knocked both her legs



from beneath her.

Then the Cimmerian scrambled up and raced northward into the night, after the camels.

He returned from the darkness on foot, not striding and looking thoroughly disgusted. He led no camels. Isparana stood waiting, glowering from a half-crouch. Her sword was up and quiveringly poised for a spitting lunge.

"Now you've done it," he said. "You frightened off the camels."

"I frightened —"

"Aye. I think they're still running."

"I . . . you filthy dog of a THIEF, you've trapped us BOTH here! I'll KILL you!" And she lunged in a rustle of enveloping jallaba.

Conan had to dive aside. He rolled. When he came up, his sword was out. "Stop it, woman! We are trapped here, as you said. Better there were two of us than one."

"But you — you . . . my *camels!* The *food!* The *water!*"

"Plenty of water a few steps away," the Cimmerian reminded her equably. "And I unpacked and left some food — what sort of man do you think I am!"

"What sort — dog! *Mangy dog!*"

"This is a big oasis and travelers are many, this time of year. We'll not starve before someone comes."

"You — my *cam* — rotten filthy *dog!* Viper! How can you stand there and talk so — aarrghh!" And she charged him.

Conan appeared to brace to meet her inexperienced

assault head-on. At the last moment he faded aside, simultaneously whipping his sword out and down to intersect hers. The blades met with a ringing clash and metal scraped along metal with a shrieking sound. She was on the run, and plunged on unable to stop; her sword was carried out of her hand.

The Cimmerian was picking it up when she wheeled to face him.

"Now *stop*," he told her. "I have no desire to kill you. I will hurt you though, if you don't stay away and leave off these mad attacks."

She stood and stared, and she wept, but not in softness and despair; she sobbed in rage and frustration. Conan knew the feeling.

"You are very weary. You've not had enough sleep. I suggest you return to your burnoos and resume your rest. I'll remain across the pool, under that largest palm."

She stood glaring, quivering in impotence. The energy of anger had to be channeled somewhere; she stamped and beat a fist into her palm. Then realization: "You were here. You *saw*!"

"Saw?" Conan sheathed his sword and transferred hers to his right hand. "Saw what?"

"Saw . . . saw me . . . you saw me . . . bathe."

"Oh, that."

Conan shrugged, yawned, and turned to walk back into the grass and trees. He said no more, and did not glance at her, though he knew she still stared. He entered the oasis and sat at the base of the tree he had stipulated. He kept her sword in his hand. The air was growing cool.

She came, taking a curving path to stay well

away from a man who both stole and insulted. Returning to where her burnoos formed a white patch on the grass, she stood a long while. At last she turned to face him across the placid water.

“Who are you?”

“Conan, a Cimmerian. And you?”

“Who sent you?”

“Sent? No one sent me. I was headed for Zamboula, from Khauran. I didn’t know about the thing in the pass among those hills. Both my horses fled and I barely escaped with my life.”

“Worse luck for me! Expert at losing valuable animals on the desert, aren’t you? You expect me to believe that you survived the Sand-lich, and are not mad?”

“I survived the thing in the gorge, yes. But surely no sane man would have been content with only your camels, once he’d seen you.”

“Save your compliments for the whores you doubtless know best! How came you here ahead of me, then?”

“Good fortune. As I emerged from the gorge, three people on camels were coming off the last of the Dragon Hills. They brought me here. Very kind people.”

“I saw them ahead of me, when I topped the first of those hills . . . but they *left* you here?”

Conan gestured. “I was not going their way.”

“But — to allow yourself to be abandoned on the desert, willingly . . .”

“It’s a pleasant place. I knew someone would come.”

That struck her silent — for a few seconds. “Monster! Dog! Son of a stinking cur! Grunting



swine! You 'knew someone would come'!"

"Aye. The Sand-lich told me how to lay him to rest . . . by killing a man named Hisser Zool, up in . . . Arenyi?"

"Arenjun," she said automatically, in thought.

"Arenjun, yes. You know this Hisser Zool?"

"No."

"Heard of him?"

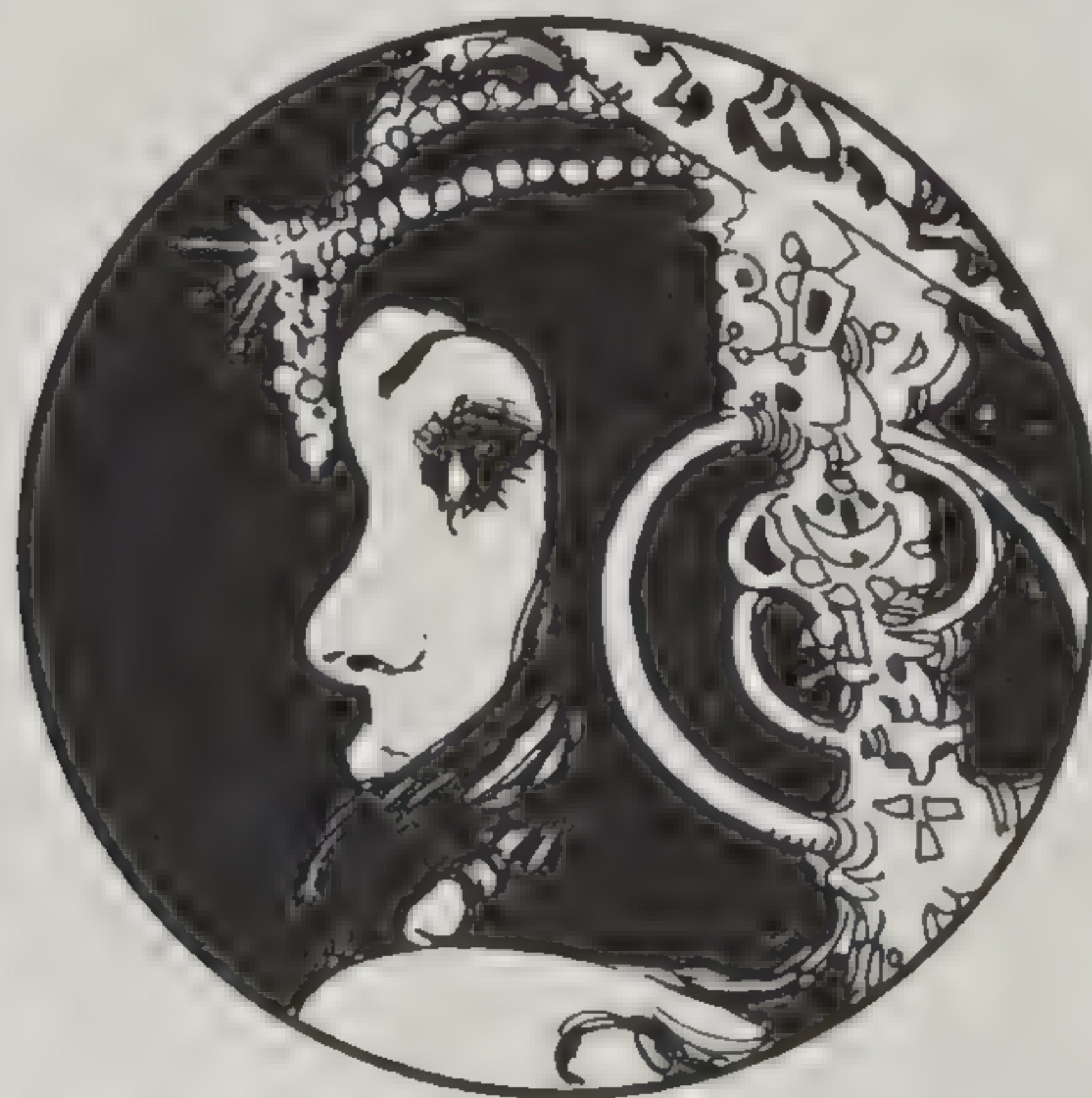
"No. Of course not. I've never been to Arenjun. *Everyone's* heard of it. You belong there, believe me!"

So we are both liars, Isparana, Conan mused; nor will I mention to you the caravan coming from Khawarizm . . . nor call you by name. Sleep, Isparana. Conan is weary . . . and durst not rest until you do!

She sat, seeming to fold up. Though he could not see her features, he knew she was staring at him. Her exhaustion and her body's need for rejuvenating sleep overcame all her thoughts of him and food and the morrow; she lay back.

After a time she slept, and after a longer time, sitting propped against the tree, so did Conan.

She too was a thief, and quiet; she awoke him with the point of her sword at his eyes.







8.

Slavers!

"I'll not beg, woman," Conan said, looking up along the shining blade of Isparana's sword. "I'd give you something to consider, though."

"I'm listening," Isparana said.

"That is a caravan I see beyond you, coming up from the south. A few minutes more and we'll hear their bells. In less than an hour they will be here. Are you sure you can convince them you didn't simply murder me?"

She was wise enough to back two paces before looking southward. A glance was sufficient to assure her he had not invented the approaching caravan.

A nasty smile rearranged her features when she faced the Cimmerian again. "If those are Zamboulans, dog, they will know and believe me when they hear my story — and you will die *slowly*, as you deserve."

"Bloodthirsty wench! And if it's a party of slavers from Khawarizm? What then?"

She blinked. "Why — they'll not harm a free woman of Zamboula, also of the Empire of Turan!"

"Hm. A woman without goods, animals, protector . . . hm. We could be a pair of runaway slaves. No, they'd not harm you — they'd just add you to their coffle."

Now Conan's peripheral vision showed him that a party of horsemen had left the caravan and was coming in at the gallop; men to scout the oasis, he assumed.

"Erlik! That — that's unthinkable. But even so — what matters it whether I kill you or no?"

"What will it gain for you, so long as there's the chance I might die slowly, in Zamboula?"



“Revenge! But for you I’d greet them as one of property, with two camels and one laden.” Isparana’s face tightened, and her eyes went hard again.

Conan sat gazing up at her. He did not think she would kill him thus out of hand. Meanwhile, her ankles were just out of reach of his feet, his sword and dagger were sheathed, and five horsemen were rapidly approaching. He told her of them, suggesting that she hide aught she had of value. She spun, as the caravan guards, slowing to a ragged center, reached the oasis.

“Ho!”

“Ho yourself,” Conan said, and rose while Isparana looked uncertainly from him to the newcomers. Her sword wavered in her hand.

“You two have this oasis all to yourself?” The mounted man looked around. “Where are your animals?”

Conan stepped forward and slipped an arm around Isparana. He had to clench her shoulder, as she sought to flinch away. “Stolen, by Erlik!” Conan said. “My . . . woman and I came down here from Shadizar, up in Zamora. We were to meet her cousin, Arsil of Samara; he’s a soldier of the Empire. Well, we waited for days — and when nine mangy desert rats stopped here, we were too kind. They made off with our animals. Two horses and two camels, by Erlik!”

“Thieving swine! And — her cousin . . . still not here, eh?”

Conan tried to dissuade slavers from enslaving thoughts: “They arrived a few hours later. They hardly paused, but rode after the thieves.”

“Ah.” The man turned to say something to

those with him, then paced his horse into the verdure. "We saw no one."

"No," Conan said, "they all rode north. You will doubtless meet Arsil and his men coming back soon. Carrying bodiless heads, I hope."

"They left you that?" The horseman indicated the small pack Conan had meant to leave for Isparana.

"Aye. You from Zamboula, Captain?"

"No; Khawarizm." The man dismounted. His beard, Conan saw, failed to cover several scars. A longtime mercenary then. "You're not offended by the sight of . . . human trade-goods, are you?"

"Your business," Conan said, "is yours, and ours is ours."

"Of course. We will tarry a few hours — then you may join us."

"We'd best just wait here," Conan said easily, "for Arsil and his Imperial soldiers. Don't you think, Kiliya?"

"Definitely," Isparana said, swift-mindedly following his lead. "Arsul will be back soon. Perhaps the captain and I can discuss the possibility of our buying a horse." She turned a smile on Conan. "I can await you in Zamboula, my love."

"I'd not think of your traveling all that way south alone, my love," Conan said, smiling just as sweetly.

Also smiling, the mercenary stepped forward so that he was on the side of Isparana opposite Conan. "Perhaps it's your accent, northman," he said, "but I note you and, uh, Kiliya do not agree as to her cousin's name. I am also no such

fool as to believe that five soldiers of far Samara would ride so far north to meet a mere *cousin* of one of their number."

"Unless she's the cousin of the ruler of Samara!" Conan said in an even tone, and he too managed to maintain his smile. "You can understand that we did not wish to tell you so, Captain. Though your trade is guarding camels and slaves, you must know about such things as state secrets."

For a moment the mercenary captain looked most unsure. Then, "Aye . . . and now I'd hear you tell me the name of the ruler down in Samara."

Conan, who had no idea, held his open expression. "Tell him, my lady."

Isparana stared imperiously at the guardsman. "I am not in the habit of being interrogated."

"Hisarr Khan rules Samara," Conan said, hoping that the captain did not know, either.

"Wrong," the man from Khawarizm said.

"Damn," Conan said, and stepped away from Isparana with hand on hilt.

"Ha! I know not the name of Samara's ruler — but neither do you!" the captain said. He gestured to his mounted men. "These look like two escaped slaves to me! Here is where we earn our employer's promised bounty. Take them!"

Conan drew sword with one hand and yanked Isparana away from the man with the other. "Better use your sword, my lady! And pray for Arsil's return!"

Isparana had never sheathed her sword; the mercenary captain was reaching for his; a rider came at Conan. As he leaned down to hack with



the big club he wielded rather than sword, Conan lunged beneath his horse in a headlong dive. He was up on the other side before the mercenary had recovered from his heavy swing. His twisting in the saddle was too late; Conan cupped a hand under the man's foot and tipped him off his horse. At the same time Isparana, noting the captain's attention was on Conan, stabbed him in the left armpit.

With cries of shock and rage, the others spurred forward, and hands clutched for swords rather than slave-taming clubs.

"Get the one on the ground!" Conan yelled, and though the horse from Khawarizm turned three-quarters around, the Cimmerian hung on and dragged himself up into the saddle.

At his words two of the three attackers reined toward Isparana. Conan booted his new mount hard, so that it plunged between her and the charging Khawarizmi. The sword of one was already raised on high for a downward stroke to split the woman; without pausing Conan slashed his belly open from hip to hip. The man cried out in pain at the same time as Isparana sworded the one Conan had tumbled off his horse.

"Get that horse!" Conan yelled, yanking his grunting mount around to drive at the other two from the caravan.

Unfortunately they swerved so that he passed between them. He took a cut high on his left arm while he slashed the other horseman across the face. While he fell back with a hand to his scarlet features, Conan again yanked his horse around. The man who'd cut him was doing the same. And Isparana, somehow, was mounted, with her



jallaba open to the navel and hiked to the hips.

"Take him from behind, 'my lady'!" Conan called, looking past the last foe.

The mercenary's eyes went huge. Without glancing back he jerked his horse's head rightward at the same time as he clapped heels to its flanks. The beast bolted. With his four companions sore wounded or worse, the terrified Khawarizmi fled back to the slaver caravan.

"Five hardly worth their pay," Conan snarled. "Just let me snatch up this bit of provisions, 'my love,' and we'd best head north, at the gallop!"

Then he looked her way, saw her sword rushing at his face and her contorted features behind, and ducked desperately. The sword missed; Isparana was already kicking her mount into a gallop on a southwesterly course, to avoid the



other caravan guards. Conan, meanwhile, had no occasion to know that she would never make it. He not only fell, but bashed his head on the large old palm. For Conan, the sun went out.

Five men in matched cloaks and spiked helmets sat their horses and watched with disapprovingly set faces while a caravan plodded by on its way north. The five soldiers led two extra horses; the caravan led four, and some twoscore shuffling slaves on a single chain attached to the left ankle of each.

“They seem to have lost some guards,” one of the soldiers said. “I see only six, plus two wounded men and four riderless horses.”

“Good observation, Kambur. Perhaps we’d best ask them if —”





“Arsil! Arsil of Samara!”

“Tarim’s eyes! Who calls — one of the slaves?”

“Arsil! Conan the Cimmerian needs help!”

As Arsil’s eyes isolated the man who’d shouted from the very end of the line of shackled slaves, a mercenary guard rode at the big man, raising a whip. Arsil’s arm leaped out, finger extended at the guard.

“Strike him and *die*, mercenary! Caravan master: Call a halt! Kambur, Sarid — to the end of the slave-coffle, and bring his horses. Be ready to fight, if these swine insist on denying our blue-eyed friend’s claim to freedom! After me!” And Arsil’s heels kicked, and his horse bolted for the caravan’s head. Two of his men followed. Leading the two horses they’d easily captured just north of the Dragon Hills, the other two rode for Conan. He brought up the very rear of the caravan save for two mounted guards.

A few minutes later one Iskul, caravan master, was expostulating. “He slew two of my guards and sorely wounded two others! He’s lucky we didn’t kill him!”

“Lucky?” Arsil’s hand loosened his sword in its sheath; Iskul’s eyes followed the movement. “Would you rather be dead or enslaved? Speak up swiftly, citizen of the Empire I serve; I can accommodate you in *one* of the choices.”

The man from Khawarizm swallowed, took some time to think, and made another attempt. “Captain, Captain! We are *merchants* here, acting for other merchants to enrich the same Turanian Empire you serve — too. You have no authority to stop us and demand one of our slaves!

As well demand the other trade goods.”

“Did you steal it, too?”

“Captain —”

“You had ten guards. One man, you say, slew two and wounded two others. We are five, on a mission for the Empire,” Arsil said, stretching fact a bit. “In my possession is my khan’s document empowering me to accost thieves and return their loot — and you know my khan is the King-Emperor’s wife’s cousin. By Tarim, I believe my writ could be made to apply to you. I will have the Cimmerian, sir. Will you give the order or must we embarrass the Empire of Turan by drawing steel?”

Again Iskul was silent, thinking. And again: “Look here, Captain, we need not talk so. He’s a big strapping fellow, and his price will be excellent! Perhaps you and I could strike a bargain. I am no poor man —”

“Just,” Arsil said, “about to be a dead one. I do not bribe, fellow.”

“Ah! Demons take you both! He’s surely a rebellious type anyhow. *Fars!* Loose that last one. The dog has a friend.”

“And the woman the bastards captured with me!” Conan yelled, before he took time to consider what a fine slave *Isparana* would make, who had enabled him to be taken — and then failed to outrun the other mercenaries anyhow.

After a brief confrontation, Iskul bawled a second order. *Fars*, flanked by two of Arsil’s men, dared do no more than open Conan’s shackle, then *Isparana*’s. Grinning, the Cimmerian looked up at the soldiers.

“Kambur of Iranistan! My deep thanks. And

you even brought my horses. This," he said, laying a hand on Isparana's shoulder, which was bared to the sun in punishment, "is the woman I sought for my master. Those two camels — there, see — are hers. She's going south as you are; here, Isparana, is a fine escort for you — brave men, and my personal friends."

She glared darkly at him. The Eye of Erlik flashed on her bosom; the false Eye. Conan whirled to Fars, whom he passed with a snarl so animalistic that the Khawarizmi mercenary fell back, wide-eyed. He made no demurrer when Conan took two weapon-belts from his saddle; each bore a sheathed sword and dagger. Conan first strapped on Isparana's, then his own. He looked up with a bright smile as Arsil came cantering to him.

"Arsil my friend, I am indebted to you forever!"

"Just claim nothing and no one else here, Conan," Arsil said, "else we have rebellion within the Empire! You'd make a rotten slave anyhow, blue-eyes."

"Would I not indeed! Now Isparana here — methinks she'd be a perfect slave. Yet I am weak and overly gentle, and could not let her remain cuffed. Why, one of those two camels is actually her own!"

Arsil turned his head a bit to one side. "And the other?"

Conan spread his hands. "I told you I followed her for my employer, up in Shadizar. She had several little items of his — but all are in the pack on the sumpter-camel's back — my *employer's* camel."





That brought life to Isparana for the first time in the day and a half they had been slaves; she had been as if dazed, and the sudden appearance of friends of the Cimmerian thief and the opening of her iron anklet had been just as perplexing. Now she rounded on the grinning Conan.

“Animal! Son of an animal! Dog of a thief — that is MY camel! Both are and you know it. Captain — look at me. I am on a mission for the khan of Zamboula himself. How can a soldier of Turan allow this — this —”

“Best cease your habitual lying, my love,” Conan said, “lest I claim too that bauble you wear around your neck.”

Isparana’s voice broke off; Isparana’s eyes widened; Isparana’s hand clamped over the amulet made by Hisarr Zul to confound thieves — a bit too late. Isparana’s lips, too, clamped.

Conan smiled up at the mounted Arsil. “Did you find aught at the oasis up yonder?”

“Nothing. The caravan you mentioned must have done something with the bodies you left. Naturally, they also appropriated the camels. A fine gift, to them.”

Conan wagged his head. “I do feel responsible, Arsil, and I am in your debt. Here.” He unstrapped the sword he’d taken from Uskuda the Samaratan thief. “Take this; it is proof to your khan that you met and slew Uskuda and his partner.” He turned to his own sumpter-horse, and swiftly unstrapped a smallish pack. “You know what this contains, Arsil, and you know whence it came, though you’d have let me keep it. Take it too. This way you return proof of Uskuda’s death as well as a goodly portion of his loot.”

“Conan, you were born too low! Come with us; a man of your abilities and noble nature will soon be *my* superior in the Guard of Samara!”

“*Noble*,” Isparana muttered — and both Arsil and Conan stared until she looked away.

“I will never forget you or that offer of employment,” Conan said, and he paused to show his pantherish strength and suppleness by pouncing onto his horse. “But I *must* get myself up north, now. My employer does have a certain . . . hold on me. ‘My lady’ — you do think swiftly and you are good with a sword — too bad we cannot remain a team!”

“Speaking of swords, do — uh, Conan —”

He clapped a hand to his, which had been hers. “Ah, you’ll not need one, dear girl — these big Turanian soldiers will take care of you! Do fare well down in Zamboula. Oh — Arsil, my friend: get her to show you how well she swims!”

And Conan urged his horse into a trot, with the other, a little more lightly laden, hurrying along behind at the end of his lead. Behind him swift-plodded Isparana’s dromedary. All along the line of the caravan Conan rode, grinning, and paused only for a long, long moment in which he stared down at Iskul of Khawarizm.

“Some day, fat one . . . some day I am going to come down to Khawarizm, and open up your belly to let the air out, and burn down your whole rotten slaving city!”

Then Conan galloped northward, and he made but one small divergence on his direct route to Arenjun. At a certain oasis, he placed a hundred steps eastward into the desert and there dug up a nice little package he had buried.



9.

**Black Lotus
and
Yellow Death**

“So, Conan of Cimmeria! You are back in much less than a month,” Hisarr Zul said, his brows arching above exophthalmic eyes. “You have succeeded in your mission, then?” The mage stood rocking on his toes, his hands clasped behind his back as Conan had first seen him.

“Aye,” the Cimmerian said, and he glanced about the Green Room to which Hisarr’s eerie guards had conducted him. Once again he was weaponless; those were down by the manse’s rear door. Aye, there it was, he saw with a qualm and a renewal of that inner sensation of emptiness. There in the cupped hands of the statue of a black demon rested the little mirror containing his soul.

Conan gestured. “I’ll have that mirror emptied, sorcerer.”

“Will you! Nothing simpler — for me. But first the proof of your success in retrieving the amulet.”

“I do hate to part with it,” Conan said. “I’ve worn it for a week now.”

“Hmm. And the copy I gave you?”

“It has been in the hands of her who stole the real Eye from you. She is doubtless still on her way to Zamboula — with the five-man escort I arranged.”

“How resourceful you are, Conan of Cimmeria!”

“Not resourceful enough. I have no waters from that river down in Kush, or Stygian iron, and I am not the sort to slay a maiden for her hair!”

The blood drained visibly from Hisarr's face. "How did you — what sort of nonsense is this you speak?"

"You have already slipped, sorcerer. It's true, then. Those are the means of your death. And all the souls you have stolen may be liberated by stuffing your dead skull with earth and burning it to ash, eh?"

Hisarr Zul was shaken, and literally staggered: he backed a pace on watery knees while he stared into deadly blue eyes. "You . . . but one person knows those things!"

"And I am he. The other has been dead ten years. Ask no more, Hisarr Zul. Return to me my soul," he said, fighting so as not to falter over the word, "and I shall tell you where to find the amulet."

Regaining control though still pale, Hisarr shook his head. "That will not do, Conan. I must see the Eye before I free you."

"And how will you know that it is the real Eye?"

"I will know. So would the Khan of Zamboula — but he will never have the opportunity."

The Cimmerian thought of Isparana, on her journey over a thousand miles south to Zamboula. "No?" He moved to place himself between his soul and its . . . keeper.

"No."

Smiling, Hisarr moved to his long, high table. There, muttering the while, he took up a carven chest of russet-colored wood. From it he took, showing each to Conan, a ruby, and two black-

barred yellow stones, and a quantity of gold dust; the components of the Eye of Erlik. He dropped them into a bowl that appeared to have been wrought from a single piece of amber larger than the Cimmerian's fist. He filled it with oil from a large stoppered jug, and struck spark to tinder. He lit the oil, which flared up bluely, with tongues of yellow.

"When the oil is consumed and the flame out, the bauble I made will be but a blob of yellow metal in which three gems are imbedded. True gems, mind; I made the copy to place here and confound thieves. As you should very well know, my northish lad, experienced thieves know gemstones from glass!"

Conan nodded. He reached within his tunic. "This will not become slag."

The sorcerer's dark eyes brightened and seemed to bulge a whit more. "No, no it will not. You have accomplished your task indeed, my good servant! Do you fetch me yon mirror, and we will soon have you whole again. A soulless man is a sad thing."

Conan said nothing; his agreement need not be expressed. He went to the statue and from its clawed, cupped hands of black jade plucked the mirror. With great care he conveyed it to the sorcerer, who stood across the table from him. There Hisarr presided over his alembics and crucibles, his powders and liquids, statuary and strange tools and that potent oil of a man who had within him the means of gaining control of the world, via the systematic stealing of souls. His eyes were fixed on the amulet Conan wore on a

simple thong around his neck. It would be Hisarr Zul's means of controlling his first ruler, and Zamboula. A mere start.

Conan placed the mirror on the table before the wizard, with great gentleness. He gazed across the board at the mage, from sullenly threatening blue eyes. Smiling, Hisarr Zul hefted a rolled strip of parchment. It was bound with a cord at either end so that it formed the customary tube.

"You are in some trouble with Arenjun's authorities, I now know. I have acquaintances among them; the magistrate, for instance. In this parchment lies the solution to all your problems, Conan of Cimmeria."

He held it high, balanced on his palm with his thumb atop, so that as Conan leaned forward to take it he was looking into the end of the tube. Conan took a deep breath . . .

So did the mage. Swiftly Hisarr Zul's head bent and he set his puckering lips to his end of the tube. He blew.

Conan knew instantly what the tube contained: death from far Khitai. Nor did he bother to cry "Dog!" at Hisarr's trick. Having assured himself that his unwilling agent had returned the Eye of Erlik, the treacherous wizard would swiftly slay one who was manifestly dangerous to begin with and who now knew far too much. He blew hard into the tube —

And Conan blew with all his might at the other end, just as the deadly powder started to emerge. Then he turned and ran as fleetly as ever he'd run, not tarrying or looking back to watch the



cloud of the black lotus's yellow death envelop Hisarr Zul's face. Conan exited the room by the same door Isparana had used, and barred it just as she'd done.

Conan sucked in a great breath — and grinned. He had blown all the deadly cloud back on the sorcerer — using Hisarr's own means against him as his dead brother had specified — and the Cimmerian felt no ill effects. He had blown so desperately in time.

He saw that he had entered a room of dark portent and shuddersome occupancy; on various tables lay the corpses of those guards he and Ajhindar had slain in this keep of sorcery and death — and none had decomposed! The room also contained their clothing and weapons, and a horrid chemical odor.

A new endeavor of that monster, Conan thought, but otherwise ignored the grim corpses. He seized on a sword, whished it through the air, tried another. First cutting off a goodly piece of thick drapery, he left the room by the corridor door. He grinned evilly at the single guard outside the Green Room. Mechanically, the soulless creature drew his sword, and again steel rang in the manse of Hisarr Zul. In less than a minute the guard bled from two wounds; the second was fatal.

“If all has gone well, your soul will soon be liberated to go — wherever the souls of the dead go,” Conan said, and he pressed the doubled scrap of velvet firmly over his mouth and nose. Then he kicked open the door to the Green Room.

Hisarr Zul, having collapsed instantly into unconsciousness, had had no opportunity to get at his antidote. More than twice two minutes had passed since Conan had left him enveloped in the cloud of greenish-yellow death. The powder still dusted the wizard's face and robe, like golden pollen.

He lay on his back, and though his eyes were closed for he'd been unconscious, he was dead.

So much for a sorcerer's nasty tricks, the Cimmerian thought, and so much for world conquest. And what a hero I am; I have just laid to rest the demon-lich of the haunted gorge!

An hour later, having used the sorcerer's own potent oil to burn his earth-stuffed skull to white ash, Conan left the keep of Hisarr Zul. He bore a huge pack, and two swords, and several daggers. Too, he wore an excellent cloak. In the pack was much valuable loot. And, wrapped many times in fine velvet, was a small and most valuable mirror under a thick glass dome.

Conan had the Eye of Erlik, and the wherewithal to gain the attention of a ruler of men, and his soul. Behind him, flames danced higher in the manse of Hisarr Zul.





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"Conan is the superman...a true hero of Valhalla, battling and suffering great wounds by day, carousing and wenching by night, and plunging into fresh adventures tomorrow."

—FRITZ LEIBER

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